

Title: The Accidental Bond

Rating: PG-15, A/U

Pairing: Harry/multi

Summary: Harry finds that his "saving people thing" is a power of its own, capable of bonding single witches to him if their life is in mortal danger, with unusual results.

((A/N: I will follow the books at times, and if you find sections of text in bold, those passages are quoted from the appropriate book, written by JKR. I will keep that to a minimum and probably only in the first chapter, but sometimes, the original text just works so well to set up my story. :))

I had not ever planned on doing a true "multi" story, but this idea just wouldn't leave me alone. Also, while mature themes will occasionally come along, there will be no explicit scenes, although I may imply a lot and leave the rest up to your imagination.

This story will be mostly about the characters. There will be action, but it will also not be the focus of the story. This story will also seem to be slow in starting. Like many stories, the altered universe need to be fleshed out and like ripples in a pond, the first ripples are the largest and cause the most difficulty/time in dealing with them. BTW, this story is probably not for you if Molly Weasley is your favourite character. :))

A special thanks goes out to XRaiderV1, moshpit, and NotACat for beta'ing this story for me. While I haven't quite finished the first draft stage, I'm close enough to guess we'll end near 325Kw and about 30 chapters, so this will be a non-trivial story. I'm not sure what the update schedule will be. I'll try for weekly, or maybe a little faster later on.

Just in case anyone is confused, the "Harry Potter universe" and all that is commonly recognized to be part of the commercial "Harry Potter universe" are owned by someone commonly known as JKR

and probably various corporations. I will take credit for this story, plot, original characters, and anything else left over that is not recognized to be JKR's. No, I am not JKR -- I'm not even the right gender. This is all done for fun, no profits will be made from the story.

))

The Accidental Bond

Chapter 1 - Trolls Can Be Hazardous

An eleven year-old Harry Potter walked into Charms class on Halloween morning and quickly became excited when Professor Flitwick announced they would start practicing the Levitation charm for the first time. While Harry normally sat beside Ron Weasley, his mostly best friend, today the professor had partnered him with Seamus Finnigan. Ron had been partnered with Hermione Granger.

While the professor handed out feathers for them to practice with, Harry considered his new friends again. Seamus, Dean, and Neville, three of his dorm mates, were pretty good blokes. None of them was a bully like his cousin Dudley, although he was having trouble figuring Neville out, as Neville was so shy he would hardly talk to anyone.

Ron had sort of become Harry's best mate, almost by default. Harry appreciated the red-haired boy as he had been friendly with him from the moment they had met on the train, but there was something a bit off with him. Ron seemed to alternate between being friendly and being a prat. Worse still, Harry never knew which mood Ron would be in at any given time. When he was friendly, Ron was everything Harry hoped he would have in a friend, which was wonderful considering how he had grown up. But when Ron was in "prat mode", it was like he was a "good" version of Draco Malfoy. At the moment, Harry was trying to be friendly to him and wait and see what happened, hoping Ron turned into a true best mate.

Then there was Hermione, who had somehow arrived in his life. She

was incredibly smart, even as a first-year. Her dedication to learning was almost scary, which made Harry wonder why she was that way, as well as why she was in Gryffindor. She was nice enough when she wanted to be, but at the moment they were iffy on being friends. She was a bit put out with him for receiving a broom from Professor McGonagall and for being on the Quidditch team, both of which she had let him know that she perceived as breaking the rules. Harry had quickly noticed that she held both teachers and rules in high regard. He understood that, but was unsure why she took that view to such an extreme. Still, they mostly got along and would probably become better friends one day.

Professor Flitwick handed Harry and Seamus a feather to share and prompted them to start working. It did not take long for there to be "results". Harry had no clue how Seamus had done it, but his dorm mate had burnt their feather to a crisp, requiring their diminutive professor to supply a new one.

Harry glanced one table over and saw Ron and Hermione bickering about how to do the spell. He started to shake his head in mirth when Hermione pointed her wand at their feather and cast "Wingardium Leviosa!" perfectly, causing the feather to rise as required. Leave it to her to show Ron how to cast it on the first try.

"Oh, well done, Miss Granger," Flitwick enthusiastically congratulated her. "Everyone look at Miss Granger's wonderful work. Take five points for Gryffindor, Miss Granger."

Ron started muttering something, obviously in a dark temper. Hermione gave him a few questioning looks, but it looked to Harry as if she had not fully heard Ron and was only reacting to his very displeased expressions.

As soon as class was over, Ron quickly left his desk and joined Harry as they walked out into the corridor. With a loud and snide voice, he said, "It's no wonder no one can stand her, she's a nightmare,

honestly."

Someone knocked into Harry as they hurried past him. It was Hermione. Harry caught a glimpse of her face -- and was startled to see that she was in tears.

"I think she heard you."

"So?" said Ron, not looking a bit uncomfortable. "She must've noticed she's got no friends."

"But you don't have to rub it in," Harry replied. Ron looked over and shrugged. He was in "prat mode" at the moment.

Hermione wasn't seen for the next class or for the rest of the afternoon. That evening, on their way down to the Great Hall for the Halloween feast, Harry overheard Parvati Patil telling her friend Lavender Brown that Hermione was crying in the girls' toilets and wanted to be left alone. Harry suspected that even Ron would have felt awkward at hearing that, but at the moment, he was engaged in talking to Dean and had not heard. They all entered the Great Hall and saw all the Halloween decorations, which caused even Harry to put Hermione out of his mind. He thought the carved pumpkins were especially well done.

Harry and the rest of his year mates took their seats at the table, enjoying the festive occasion. Tasty looking food magically appeared on golden plates and everyone started dishing out their food.

Harry was just helping himself to a jacket potato when Professor Quirrell came sprinting into the Hall, his turban askew and terror on his face. Everyone stared as he reached Professor Dumbledore's chair, slumped against the table and gasped, "Troll -- in the dungeons -- thought you ought to know."

He then sank to the floor in a dead faint.

There was uproar. It took several purple firecrackers exploding from the end of Professor Dumbledore's wand to bring silence. "Prefects," he rumbled, "lead your houses back to the dormitories immediately!"

Percy was in his element. "Follow me! Stick together, first-years! No need to fear the troll if you follow my orders! Stay close behind me, now. Make way, first-years coming through! Excuse me, I'm a Prefect!"

Harry stared blankly at the Prefect for a brief moment. He was so unlike Ron or the twins, Fred and George.

"How could a troll get in?" Harry asked as they climbed the stairs.

"Don't ask me, they're supposed to be really stupid," said Ron. "Maybe Peeves let it in for a Halloween joke."

They passed different groups of people hurrying in different directions. As they jostled their way through a crowd of confused Hufflepuffs, Harry suddenly remembered his other friend -- Hermione. As the crowds jostled him and he was separated from Ron, he realized that she would not know about the troll. He started to yell for Ron to come help him warn her, but then he remembered why she was in hiding and did not really expect Ron to come help, given how the two were not getting along. Ducking past a big seventh year Hufflepuff, Harry started running down another corridor away from the rest of the Gryffindors.

Racing down the corridor and stairs, he made it to the girls' bathroom just in time to see the back side of the troll go in. It was grey and huge. Running in anyway, he was almost knocked over by the stench of the creature. A girl's scream brought his attention back to the matter at hand.

The troll raised its large club and swung, knocking a stall door off its

hinges and violently throwing it across the room to break a sink. Knowing that Hermione was in danger, even if they were not best of friends at the moment, Harry pulled his wand out and ran, jumping on the back of the troll, throwing his arms around the troll's neck. Praying he could distract the troll and allow Hermione to escape, he jammed his wand in the troll's face, unaware that the instrument had lodged in the creature's nose. While not what Harry had planned, he had accomplished his goal, the troll had completely forgotten the girl in its pain.

As the troll roared, Harry thought his hardest about pushing "magic" out of his wand, wishing that the troll was no longer there. He did not see a pencil-sized beam of white light burst out of the top of the troll's head and hit the ceiling, but Harry did notice that the troll had suddenly ceased roaring and was starting to fall forward. Yanking his slime covered wand back, Harry rode the troll as it fell, landing on the troll's back on all fours. There was now silence -- except for a brief whimper.

Harry looked up and saw Hermione crouching on the floor of the stall with the missing door. "Y-you all right?" he asked with a shaky voice. He could not believe what he had just done, but felt it was important to look after Hermione for the moment.

"Y-y-you, you saved m-my life. I w-w-was going to d-die and you s-saved my life!" She was starting to sound more hysterical as she talked.

He hurried over to her. "I'm glad you're safe." As he said that, Harry started to feel a strange something in his mind, but he did not recognize it. However, that strange feeling reminded him that they were in a strange situation and needed to do something. "Hermione, I don't know what's going on with everything, but I think we need to leave. Come with me?" he pleaded and grasped her hands, which felt incredibly wonderful.

With wide eyes, Hermione nodded and slowly rose as Harry stood and pulled her up. Seeing his wand in his hand and that it was "messy", he quickly wiped it on the troll's coarse loin-cloth and then hurried her out of the bathroom.

Trying to avoid everyone, Harry pulled her in the opposite direction they should have gone, which was towards the Great Hall and the main stairs.

"Harry, this is the wrong way; the Great Hall is the other way..."

"I know a back way where we can hopefully not get caught. Everyone was sent back to our common room," he informed her as they quickly walked; in fact, he was almost dragging her. He took a secret passage that the Weasley twins had inadvertently shown him as he followed them one day. They were back to the Gryffindor Tower in a short time. Hermione had been quiet the whole way, and Harry was appreciative, as it gave him time to think.

Harry was not sure what was going on, just that something unusual was happening. He had never held a girl's hand before, but this felt really great, as if he never wanted to let go. Also, while he would have considered Hermione a friend that morning, now, she seemed more important to him -- important enough that he would protect her from anything. It was a strange feeling, but he kind of liked that too.

They had barely made it back to their common room, without being caught in the corridors, when Ron walked up to them. "What are you doing holding her hand?" he asked as if he could not believe Harry was doing that.

"I think I'm helping her get to safety," Harry almost snarled, unsure where this feeling was coming from.

Ron stepped back. "Why?" he asked, looking bewildered.

"Because," Harry continued aggressively, "you and your 'I'm better than everyone else' attitude caused her to hide from you. That meant she didn't know about the troll. So I had to go and find her and bring her back here. It's all your fault, you know."

He felt a pull on his arm, so he looked at Hermione. He could tell she was about to say something and he was afraid she might give something away, so he squeezed her hand and shook his head just slightly when she looked at him. She nodded back and meekly looked down.

"I can't believe you..." Ron said, starting to get angry.

"Believe it, Ron. Now go eat, since that's what you seem to do best, and leave us alone until you have something important to say to her," Harry told him, pointing sharply toward the place Ron had probably been sitting before, next to Dean.

Ron muttered something, but Harry did not catch it and decided not to care, just like he did not care that Percy was staring at them too. Harry had thought Ron was his friend, but this was hard to understand. As Ron turned his back, Harry pulled Hermione the other way to the other side of the room. He led her over to a corner and sat them down on the floor behind some chairs, out of sight from most of the room.

They had barely sat down when Hermione threw herself on Harry, almost knocking him over, giving him a hug that practically squeezed the life out of him as she started quietly sobbing. Not knowing what else to do, he put his arms around her, although not nearly as tightly. While this felt nice in its own way, it was not as good as holding her hand. As he tried to decide what to do, she shifted and her bare arm touched his bare neck and everything felt good again. So Harry just held on and marvelled in his first real hug as she cried, not caring in the slightest that his shoulder was slowly becoming very damp.

Minerva McGonagall stopped in the hallway and sniffed, almost revolted by what she smelled. Still, she had a job to do. It was not hard to figure out what direction the smell came from, so she hurried in that direction. Her four paws allowed her to run quickly. A moment later, she was sure that her quarry was behind this bathroom door, so she transformed back into her human form. As she left her cat Animagus form, the stench lessened. She also noticed that there were no sounds coming from behind the door, which she thought unusual as trolls were rarely silent.

Wand out, she slowly opened the door to the girls' bathroom in the dungeons and was horrified at what she found. She quickly sent a magical message off to the Headmaster and slowly went in. She had just verified that the troll was indeed dead when the Headmaster came in, along with Professor Flitwick.

"I see you found it, Minerva," the deep calm tones of the Headmaster said as he walked over. "Is it unconscious or dead?"

"It's quite dead, Albus. I don't understand it. There's no one here and there's no blood," she said, shaking her head. "And look at the room. It was on a rampage, but again, there's no victim."

"Look on the top of his head, Minerva," the squeaky voice of Flitwick said, standing at the troll's feet.

"Why?" Dumbledore asked.

Flitwick pointed to the ceiling. "While I don't ever come in here, I find it most unusual to see a hole in the ceiling, and it looks freshly made."

McGonagall walked around and made a disgusted sound. "I'm afraid you're correct. There's a quarter-inch hole in the top of his head.

Even more surprising is that there is no blood. It's as if it's been cauterized."

"Like a drilling spell," Flitwick said as he nodded. He pulled out his wand and levitated the troll before flipping it over on its back. "And no hole on the front. The spell must have gone through its mouth or nose. The odds against that shot scoring in one of its few easily vulnerable areas are quite high."

"And yet it has happened," Dumbledore murmured.

"What was it doing here?" McGonagall asked. "I thought you already had one in place as a guard?"

"I do," the Headmaster replied. "I suspect this one came from the same clan and was looking for its friend, but I suppose we'll never know." He did several revealing spells around the room. "Nothing, there's not a single clue as to who might have done this," he said, sounding slightly upset. "Do either of you have any ideas?"

Neither colleague offered any ideas.

He cleared his throat. "Yes, well, what's done is done. Please check your charges to make sure everyone is accounted for and keep your ears open for any rumours in case someone saw something or is injured. I'll inform Pomona and Severus and have them do the same. Please report back to me if anyone is missing or if you develop any leads on this mystery. I shall work on how it might have entered the castle."

With a flick of his wand, the troll was transfigured into a rat and deposited into the trashcan in the corner. A few more waves of the wand repaired the bathroom, restoring it to its former state. All three professors left wondering exactly what had happened and who had done it.

Harry had no idea how long they had been sitting and holding each other. He knew that Professor McGonagall had come in for a few minutes and talked to Percy, but they had been left alone. Eventually, Hermione sniffled and lessened her hold on him, although she did not let go completely.

"Harry," she whispered, "I'm sorry I'm crying all over you, but I just couldn't stop." Whispering seemed like the right thing to do. It kept the conversation more private and, well, intimate.

Not knowing what else to do, Harry lightly patted her on the back before whispering, "It's all right. I've never been hugged before and it felt really good." He shocked himself saying that. Why had he let that slip out?

Hermione pulled back and looked at him closely with red-streaked eyes. "Never before?" After he nodded, she said, "You've not talked about your life outside of here."

He looked down, not sure what to say, but somehow feeling like he could trust her with anything. "There's not much to say about it; certainly nothing good."

"Would you tell me, please?" she softly begged. "I want to know."

Harry started to tell her 'no' until she went on.

"I want to know about you, Harry. If it will help, I'll even promise to tell you anything about me that you want to know," she told him sincerely.

There was something about her request, her phrasing, that made him understand she did want to know about him, the real him. As he started to answer, his stomach rumbled.

Hermione let a short giggle out. "Maybe we should get something to eat first. The food will eventually go away and I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast."

"I can get it for you if you want to stay here," Harry offered. It seemed like the thing to do.

Hermione smiled and leaned forward, brushing her cheek against his as she gave him a light hug. "Thank you, Harry, but I'm feeling well enough now to get it." She let go and stood up.

Immediately, she was uncomfortable. Looking at Harry, it was obvious that he felt it too. Realizing that the only things that had changed were that they were standing and not holding hands, she reached out and grabbed his hand. Immediately, the comforting feeling came back.

Harry had figured out what was going on as he told her, "We need to touch and yet...we need to not be seen while we do this or we'll raise suspicions. Can you make it?" he asked.

She gave his hand a squeeze. "I can for a few minutes, but please don't dilly-dally."

He nodded and led the way over, with her closely following. At the tables with food, they saw that most of it was gone, but there was enough left they could still have their fill as they were the last to eat.

"Hey Harry! Where've ya been?" Seamus called out from a nearby table. Dean and Ron were sitting with him.

Harry quickly glanced around and saw that almost half of the house had gone up to their dorm rooms. Hermione was also trying to hurry with her food and she was making an effort to face away from everyone or else look down so her hair covered her face.

"Sitting on the other side of the room," he said, trying to sound as if nothing unusual was going on while he dished out food onto his plate.

"You've been talking to Hermione?"

Seamus looked like he was just asking to be asking, and Dean looked similarly curious, but Ron still looked upset at him. Harry chose to ignore the one he thought was his friend.

"Yeah." He was not sure what else to say, or really that he wanted to say anything else at the moment.

"What for? I thought you were still mad at her about the way she carried on with you getting the broom and being on the Quidditch team?"

Seamus was still acting as if he was just trying to find out information, but Harry felt his anger start to return and he really did not want to go there for now. So he hurriedly poured himself some water and grabbed it so he could leave. "I was never that upset with her and we've worked past that and we're friends again." With that as a parting comment, he quickly turned and left for their corner. Hermione had already finished serving herself and was waiting for him.

They sat back down, again mostly hidden from everyone, and started to eat after they held hands again. Eating with one hand slowed them down, but the comforting feeling was well worth it.

"Harry?" Hermione restarted the conversation, again whispering. "I'm sorry about the argument over the broom. It's just -- I've always lived by the rules and think they're made for everyone. And, well..." she trailed off.

It was not hard to guess what she was about to say. "You've been made fun of because people didn't always follow the rules and you did, right?" he asked, knowing it had to be true. It had happened to him often enough, with Dudley leading the charge.

She slowly nodded. "When the rules aren't followed, then it's not fair for everyone."

He understood, really he did, but she was not totally right either. "I think you're right, most of the time, but there can be exceptions, Hermione. I hate my uncle and I think he's lied to me more often than he told the truth, but he did say one thing that I believe to be very true."

"What?" she asked, looking into his eyes and wondering what he knew.

"Life is not always fair. I think people should be treated the same, whether they're smart or not smart, or whether they have a stupid scar on their forehead," the last said a little more angrily, "and a lot of other things, but life doesn't seem to work that way. We're both made fun of at times, for different reasons, but all we can do is try to go on as best we can. When life isn't fair, you do the best you can." He had thought about this a lot when locked in his cupboard under the stairs, usually after his uncle had done something 'unfair' to him. Harry knew he could only do his best with what he had.

Hermione took another bite of food and considered what he had said. She knew it was true and even had thought similar thoughts. "I know you're right, but I still don't like it. It makes life messy and unpredictable."

Harry chuckled, happy for a little levity. "I'm sure it was all done just to annoy you," he said with a grin.

"Prat," she softly said with a smile.

Harry just squeezed her hand, still smiling. He ate the last few bites on his plate before he set it aside. He moved so he could lean against the wall, and she put her plate on his and moved with him, leaning against him -- still holding hands.

"Harry? If I tell you something, will you not make fun of me?" she asked hesitantly and a little fearful. She trusted him, and yet, they had not had much time to show that trust.

"Of course," he quickly assured her. "I may tease you from time to time in fun, but I'll do my best to never be unkind. What is it?"

"I'm ... I'm scared. I can tell something has happened to us and I can't figure out what it is. I know I still have a lot to learn, but I don't see anyone else doing what we're doing and I've never read about it either. There are a lot of books in the library to check, but if this was common, I'm sure I would have read about it already in one of my introductory books."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It was something he always did before he had to deal with Dudley. He thought it always made it easier for him figure out how to get away from his cousin.

"I have no idea. I've only known about the wizarding world for about three months."

"Me too. It's so unfair," she grumbled.

Harry quietly snickered and she smiled for a moment, knowing that he was thinking about his uncle's comment. He also thought about their situation for a moment. "I'm sorry," he quietly told her.

She looked at him as in confusion for a moment. "For what?"

"For getting you into this. I'm sure it's my fault; it always is," he said

dejectedly, unable to look at her.

"No," she said firmly but quietly.

"No?"

"No, I don't forgive you because there's nothing to forgive. It's not your fault. If it's anyone's fault, it's mine," Hermione insisted.

"But..."

"Harry, did you let the troll in the castle?"

"Err, no."

"Did you make it attack me?"

"Of course not!" he said fiercely but still quietly.

"Did you upset me? Did you force me to hide in the girls' bathroom?"

"No, but I didn't stop Ron or go after you."

"Right, it was Ron's fault I was upset, not yours. And it was my fault for hiding in the bathroom. You did come after me when you really needed to. It's not your fault in any way. None." She glared at him to make sure he did not try to claim the blame.

"I suppose you're right, but bad stuff always happened around me at home," he explained. "It was always my fault there."

"That was probably accidental magic, and wasn't really your fault either. You were merely untrained. That shouldn't happen any more after this first year," she told him authoritatively.

"Oh, that's good." He was not sure if that would make things better

with the Dursleys, but hopefully it would reduce the number of times they got angry with him.

Hermione nodded, looking satisfied that he accepted her explanation. "All right, describe to me what you think is happening and what you feel. I'll do the same in a minute and maybe that will help us. I'd go get something to write with and on, but I don't want to get up and leave you. This feels too nice."

He squeezed her hand, hoping to give her a little comfort. "OK. Err ... the most obvious is that I feel like I have to touch you, or have you touch me, skin to skin." He blushed as he realized what that must sound like and tried to hurry on. "I don't feel the need to do anything else, just hold your hand or something."

Hermione blushed a little too. "Same here, holding hands is good. What else?"

"I, uh, I felt really angry at Ron when he tried to insult you. Looking back at it, his first comment about holding your hand wasn't that bad, but I knew it was his fault for hurting you earlier and I couldn't help taking it out on him a bit." He slowly shook his head. "I probably owe him an apology now."

"Maybe, but if you think about it, he owes both of us an apology. Me for what he said, and you for his comments about me." She waved that off. "But the important thing for now is understanding that you feel protective of me. Right?"

Harry quickly nodded. "Yeah, a lot actually."

She considered that for a moment. "I feel the same way about you. We probably need to hide this for a while until we learn how to deal with that."

"What?" His fear of rejection, reinforced so many times by the

Dursleys came crashing down on him.

Hermione saw his expression instantly change so he looked as if he had lost his best friend. She quickly grabbed him and pulled him into a hug, feeling him sit very stiffly. "No, Harry, I'm not leaving you, not ever. You'll always be my friend." She felt him relax and his arms slowly go around her. "I meant that we need to be careful because some people would try harder to make you angry by insulting me if they knew about how we feel, that it's ... it's reflexive, I suppose." She could feel him nodding slightly on her shoulder.

"Like Malfoy," he breathed, as if afraid to say the Slytherin's name.

"You'll have to be very careful around him, Harry. I know he calls me names, but honestly, they don't bother me very much."

"But it bothers you at least some, doesn't it?" he challenged her.

She shrugged. "Only a little, but it's because I know he's trying to insult me, so I don't let it bother me."

Harry gave her a squeeze and then let go and leaned back against the wall again, although he did not let go of her hand.

"You're right, as usual," he told her with a grin, which she matched.

"And don't you forget it," she teased, causing him to chuckle. "Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"Tell me about the Dursleys and how you grew up." She felt him immediately stiffen again. "Please! I really want to know about you, about why you act like you do. You're such a mystery at times."

Harry was silent for moment, not sure how to answer, and then

deciding that a joke might help. "But why? I heard on the telly that women like mysterious men."

She lightly slugged him. "Harry..." she softly growled.

He could not help but smile. "You know that you're a lot more fun when you're playful like this, don't you?"

Hermione fixed him with a glare. "Harry, I'm waiting..."

Harry took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "That's something we need to talk about too," as she opened her mouth to say something, he hurriedly added, "Later. About me, well... After my parents were killed, I'm told I was taken to the Dursleys. I really don't know why, other than my aunt is my mother's only relative. I was eighteen months old."

She nodded, as that was the accepted story.

"What people don't know, including Dumbledore, who I'm told was the one who placed me there, is that my aunt and uncle hate magic."

"Hate?" she asked, thinking he did not really mean it.

"Yes ... unless you have a stronger word?"

"Abhor?" she quietly offered.

"Sure," Harry willingly accepted. "They abhor it and everything connected to it. I don't know why, but I do know they took their hate out on me. I was treated like a slave, doing everything around the house that I could physically do, while my cousin did nothing. If anything went wrong, I was blamed for it, even if I wasn't the one who caused it or knew what had happened. Just like in Snape's class, but worse."

"But Professor Snape isn't fair to you..." Hermione protested.

Harry was glad she would admit that. Her view of teachers was something else they needed to talk about eventually.

"It's an ugly place to be. They threw me into the cupboard underneath the stairs and that was my room until I received my Hogwarts letter."

"What?" Hermione said in a normal voice, her disgust obvious. She sheepishly looked around and no one seemed to be looking at them so she turned back to him and started whispering again. "Are you serious? Your room was a cupboard under the stairs?"

"I swear," he said as he nodded. "That's where they made me stay at nights and anytime they thought I was in the wrong, which was quite often. I had to do most of the cooking, but I rarely had as much to eat as I wanted. Even after two months, a normal meal here is a feast to me."

Hermione threw herself at him to give him another hug. "And I'm really the first person to ever hug you?" She felt herself tearing up as she thought about what it was like for him, how much worse than she had had it.

"I'm sure my mother did, but I have no memories of her. So yes, you are the first that I know of."

"I think I understand now." She sniffled quietly. "They neglected you terribly. And yet, you're the nicest person I've met here and I'm so very lucky to have you as my friend -- my best friend."

Harry squeezed her tightly for a second. "You're my best friend too."

Hermione looked out from around the chairs in front of them and saw that the common room was mostly empty now. "Harry? What are we

going to do now? I still want to hold your hand and it's time for bed."

"What if we sat down here together?" he suggested after a moment. "I think I'd like to go take a shower and change into some other clothes before we do, but I think we could hide here for most of the night." He paused for a moment before adding, "We might have to leave early too, maybe go to some unused classroom for an hour or so before breakfast."

She thought the idea through. "I guess that would work and not get us into too much trouble. We could go to breakfast side-by-side and then hold hands under the table. Since tomorrow is Saturday, we could spend our time out on the grounds or even hiding in the library."

Harry slowly started to smirk at her.

"What?" she asked.

"I find it funny that you're thinking of doing something that won't get us into too much trouble. The fact that any amount of trouble is acceptable is funny." He almost wanted to snicker at her, but managed not to, as he was afraid it might hurt her feelings.

She rolled her eyes at him. "Honestly, Harry, I'm not that bad. Even I know that some rules make no sense and are worthless."

Harry let his mirth show in his eyes and in his smile. "I'll remember that and quote you some day." He leaned out and looked around the chairs. "Percy is gone, so now would be a good time. I'll meet you back down here in about fifteen minutes. How's that?"

"I might need a couple more minutes, but I'll be as fast as I can," she told him. Looking out to make sure no one was looking their way, Hermione rose and felt the loss of Harry's comfort as she released his hand. It was all she could do to leave and not grab him again.

Without looking at him, lest she turn back, she hurriedly made her way to her dorm room.

Harry also felt Hermione's loss as she let go of his hand. He felt a shiver run through him. He almost grabbed her hand before she left, but he managed to restrain himself. After she left, he got up and quickly walked across the room. On the other side, he saw Fred and George Weasley, along with Lee Jordan. That gave him an idea; so he walked over to them. "Hey, I've got a question for you two."

"Harry, our lad..."

"Our friend..."

"Our glorious Seeker," Lee added, as if he was a part of the Weasley family and a triplet along with the twins.

"Or three," Harry added with a smile. "I've heard you talk about the kitchens. If I wanted to eat there, how would I find them and get in?"

"Ah, a man after our own heart, Fred."

"True, a real adventurer, George."

They spend the next few minutes explaining where the kitchens were and how to open the door to them. Harry thanked them and hurried up to his dorm.

His dorm mates were already asleep as the lights were out and the snores were at full strength. Harry hoped he did not snore like that when he was asleep.

Grabbing his shower things and a change of clothes, he went into the bathroom for a quick shower. Ten minutes later, he was grabbing his pillow and heading downstairs. There appeared to be only two people left in the common room, and the couple was on a couch and

oblivious to everything as their faces were pressed together. Harry did his best to ignore them, as he silently made his way over to his and Hermione's spot, but he could not help but wonder if he and Hermione might snog like that one day. At the moment, the question seemed uninteresting and it faded from his mind.

He had just made himself comfortable when Hermione quietly joined him. He noticed that she also had her pillow, along with a blanket.

"Good idea with the blanket," he whispered as quietly as he could.

She gave him a satisfied smile. "Thanks. We probably shouldn't even whisper while they're still here." She indicated the seventh-year couple on the other side of the room with her hand.

Harry nodded and made himself as comfortable as possible, leaning against the wall and his pillow. Hermione offered her pillow for both of them to sit on and then she leaned against Harry, as well as pulled the blanket over both of them. When they held hands again, they both gave little sighs of contentment.

Despite sitting on the floor, Hermione felt really comfortable snuggled up to Harry. As she fell asleep, she wondered what she had gotten herself into by entering the world of magic. She could not remember any fairy tale even remotely like the situation she found herself in at the moment.

Harry absently put an arm around Hermione's shoulders, not even aware of what he was doing. As she snuggled in, Harry relaxed and enjoyed the moment, allowing the rightness of it to wash through him. He had no idea anything like this was possible, but if magic gave him a best friend, he decided to be thankful for magic.

Something woke Harry up. He was not sure what it was, so he sat still and listened. It was a survival instinct he had learned from living with the Dursleys. He heard footsteps at the same time he realized

the sun was starting to shine through the windows a little. He thought that meant it was still pretty early, especially on a Saturday. Looking through the crack between the chairs they were hiding behind, Harry saw Percy walk across the room and out the Portrait hole. It was time to get up. He also realized that his bum was numb, reinforcing the need to get up and move around.

"Hermione," he whispered as he shook her shoulder slightly.

She slowly stirred, brushing her hair out of her face as she looked up at him. Realizing where she was, she blushed and looked back down at her arm that was around his body. "Sorry," she mumbled as she pulled it away, still holding his hand with her other hand.

"Don't be," he firmly whispered, blushing a little too. "It makes me feel ... well, like someone cares for me." Much like last night, he was a little worried that he had let his feelings be so free and spoke them honestly, even easily.

Her brown eyes snapped back up and held his for a moment before her head was buried back between his neck and shoulder. "I'm sorry, Harry. No one should have had to go through that, much less you."

"Why? I'm no one special..." She shook her head and her hair tickled his face.

"But you turned out so nice despite all you went through. That makes you very special, just like you're special because you're my friend," she confided quietly in the silent room.

He did not fully understand that, but that was a reason. "You still owe me your story, but I think we should go somewhere else to talk, so people don't find us here."

"I agree. I need to use the bathroom and brush my teeth too. You should go put your pillow back. Make sure you mess up your bed as

if you had slept in it, so people will think you just came to bed late and got up early," she told him.

He chuckled. "You're sneakier than you look."

She blushed and looked down. "I did sometimes sneak out of my room when I was younger." Her hand moved and she lost contact with him. The discomfort of not touching him was just as strong as it was last night, which worried her. "Hurry back down here, Harry."

"I will," he whispered fervently, feeling the loss too.

They both struggled getting up, stiff from sleeping while sitting on the floor. Fortunately, they met no one on the way to their rooms.

Harry crawled into bed and kicked around a little before crawling back out. He thought it looked pretty normal. Grabbing his toothbrush, he quickly took care of his bad breath. While he was brushing his teeth, he thought about Hermione and had a feeling he had never had before. It was like he knew exactly where she was, as well as knowing that she was "well", although he was not sure what that feeling meant. He could not feel her emotions or thoughts, but he could feel things about her: her location and wellness, for lack of a better way to explain it. They would have to experiment with it to know what it really meant, he decided.

He went back down to the common room and found it empty, so he waited in the chair nearest the girls' stairs. She came back down a few minutes later with her book bag in hand. It was so typical of Hermione that he had to smile at her.

Hermione gave him a slight scowl as she walked over, as she had a feeling she knew what he was smiling about, but she let it go and grabbed his hand. "Let's go," she quietly told him. They walked out the portrait hole and found a nearby classroom that was unused and had a few desks in it. "This should do," she said, sitting and pulling

out quill, ink, and parchment.

"Making a list?" he inquired, trying to read upside down what she was writing.

"Yes. I want to list what's happening as well as any ideas we may have." She was writing what they had discussed last night.

"You can add two more things," he told her.

She stopped and looked at him intently, not even noticing that her quill was about to drip and make a blot. "What?"

"Did you think about me while you were in your dorms?" He blushed when he realized what that sounded like. "I mean, think hard about me?"

Hermione looked at him for a moment. She also appeared to be struggling with her expression. "Not hard, no. Why?"

"I don't know how I know it, but I knew exactly where you were." When she looked like she was about to object, he quickly added, "I don't mean that you were in your dorm, but that..." he paused. "How do I explain this? It was like I could point to you, like I knew exactly where you were. If I knew how to make myself go somewhere, whatever you call it..."

"Apparate?" she helpfully supplied.

"Yeah, Apparate. If I could Apparate, I'm sure I could have appeared right beside you."

She worried her lower lip for a moment. "I've never heard of someone able to do that either." She added it to the list. "What was the other thing?"

"This one is harder, but I found I could tell how you were, that you were ... err, OK. I don't know how to explain it. Maybe you should try it," he suggested.

"How? Specifically how did you do it?"

"I just closed my eyes and thought very hard about you. I know, close your eyes and I'll stand on the other side of the room. Think about me and point to me without opening your eyes."

"All right," she agreed, but sounding like she was not sure this was the best idea.

Harry waited and when she closed her eyes, he started walking backward as quietly as he could -- one step backwards, one step to the right. He did not think he was making any sound. After a moment, she lifted her hand and pointed right at him. "Open your eyes," he commanded.

Hermione did and gasped. "You're right. I did know where you were and that, well, I knew you were all right, or maybe normal." She harrumphed for a second. "You're right. That is hard to describe."

He nodded and walked back over, grabbing her left hand again without even thinking about it.

"I suppose we'll just have to wait to find out more about that. Surely there is more to it than that?"

"I don't know. Have you noticed anything else?" he asked.

"No." She looked at the list and then her watch. "We've got to go. Breakfast is starting in a few minutes."

Harry smiled. "No, let's wait a few extra minutes until everyone else has gone."

"I suppose that would be helpful, as maybe we could hold hands while we walk," she theorized.

"True, but if we let them all go and let breakfast start, then we can go to the kitchens and eat there," he said with a proud grin.

She gave him a questioning look. "You know the way to the kitchens? Why haven't I heard about them before?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. I heard about them from Fred and George."

Her expression changed to one of suspicion. "Are you sure you can trust them on this?"

"I think so. We probably should be careful though," he told her, trying to sound agreeable.

"Very well, let's go then." She let go of his hand and quickly packed up her things. Grasping his hand, they went off to find the kitchens.

They came upon a few Hufflepuffs on the way down who were late for breakfast, but they heard the other students before they saw them and quickly dropped hands until they were alone again. Harry found the picture Fred had described and tickling the pear did indeed produce a door handle. Harry carefully opened the door and they slowly went inside -- their eyes wide with wonder. As Harry closed the door, the noise caught the attention of the little creatures that worked there.

An older looking creature came over to them. "What can we get you, Miss, Sir?"

"Err ..." All sane questions went right out of Harry's head, much like his first experience with goblins. These creatures were less than

waist high (and considering how short he was, that was short) with overly large eyes on their overly large heads with overly large ears. The greenish-yellowish tint also made them a little bizarre to look at, considering they were basically human shaped.

However, Hermione rose to the occasion. "Excuse me, but who are you and what are you? I've never met anyone like you before."

"I be Beaker, Miss, and I be a house-elf. We serve the castle and all who live in her."

"I've never heard of house-elves," she said to Harry. Looking at him, she saw him shrug. Turning back to the elf, she asked, "So you're like butlers, maids, and cooks? You're hired staff?"

"Oh no, Miss, we would never take wages!" His large ears flapped noisily as he vigorously shook his head in denial. "To take wages when we are serving would be ... well, it would be most degrading," he said emphatically.

"But that's wrong!" Hermione protested. "That makes you slaves!"

Beaker sighed and looked down, slowly shaking his head. "Another one who does not understand."

That brought Hermione up short, and even Harry gave him a quizzical look.

"You do not come from magical family?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, neither of us do."

"That is why you do not know. You are too young to have learned here. Go to your room of books and read. Learn that what you ask would kill us," Beaker said honestly.

Hermione gasped.

In the ensuing silence, Beaker asked again, "What can we get you, Miss, Sir?"

Harry cleared his throat and tried to talk again. "Uh, I was told that we could get some food here if we did not want to be seen in the Great Hall."

The elf brightened. "Of course, Sir. Come over to the table we keep here." The elf led them over to a small round table with four chairs.

The two students sat beside each other, still holding hands. A few snaps of the fingers by Beaker and bowls of food and place settings, just like in the Great Hall, appeared in front of them.

"Thank you -- Beaker," Hermione told him.

Harry added his thanks as well and they began to eat. After a few minutes, Harry decided this was as good a time as any to ask his questions. "Hermione? Will you tell me about yourself?"

Hermione used a napkin to dab at her mouth before she smiled at him. "Sure, Harry. Let's see... My parents are both dentists, although my father does more oral surgery than dentistry nowadays. I'm an only child. My mother had trouble getting pregnant with me, but she wanted a child so badly that they went to special doctors to help make it possible. I've always done very well in school, and my parents have supported me in all I do, mostly by buying books to read."

Harry smirked and she blushed at that admission.

"I don't like sports too much. I understand them and do like to watch rugby with my father from time to time, but I don't really care to play any of them."

"Is that why you don't like flying?" Harry asked, interested in what she would say.

She swallowed a little harder than normal. Finally she said, "No, I, uh, I'm acrophobic." At Harry's confused look, she said, "I don't like heights."

"Oh, uh ... yeah, I could see how that could be a problem."

She looked at him and it was all she could do not to say 'duh'. "Anyway, I was very surprised to find out I was a witch, although, it was not a complete surprise. I used to change the colour of my clothes by accident when I was younger."

Harry chuckled. "I turned a teacher's hair blue once. What did you do?"

Hermione was sure she looked embarrassed, but ploughed on anyway. "I don't like the colour pink. So from about the age of five, whenever my mother bought me pink clothes, they would mysteriously turn a light green or yellow overnight."

Harry laughed. "I like it. My aunt has always hated my hair, so one day she cut it very short. The next morning, it was as long as it always was." He turned sad and looked down at the table.

"What, Harry? What happened?" Hermione was concerned.

"I, uh," He did not really want to explain.

She squeezed his hand in encouragement. "It's all right, Harry. I know it's not your fault that you had horrible relatives."

He nodded hard once before he eventually said, "I didn't get to eat for two days after that." He felt her squeeze his hand and it was so

hard, she was actually hurting him a little, but he bore it as he saw the concern on her face. She let up on his hand after a long moment.

"Harry, I promise you. If there is any way possible, you won't go back there."

She looked so sincere and he could tell that she honestly meant it. "Thank you," he quietly told her, afraid to say more lest his voice betray him.

Hermione gave a smile that was only a little forced, and since they had finished breakfast, she suggested, "Why don't we go to the library now? We can research what happened to us."

"OK, but can we talk about one other thing first," he asked tentatively, using all of his Gryffindor courage to broach the subject.

"Certainly, Harry. We can talk about anything. What did you need to say?" She looked very interested in what might be on his mind.

"Since we're going to be best friends, can I ask one favour of you?" He really hoped she did not get angry at him for this.

She gave him a smile. "Of course, Harry. Just ask. I may not do it, but you can always ask."

Emboldened slightly, he launched into it. "You're really smart, Hermione, and I think that I'll learn a lot just being around you, but it's hard to be around you sometimes and if you could change one little thing, it would be helpful." She was starting to glare at him so he hurried on. "I mean, it's helpful when you remind us to do our homework, but if you could just not remind us so often."

"Harry," she huffed, "you're at a school. The reason to come to a school is to learn. You won't learn if you don't do your homework."

"I know, and I do my homework, but there's more to school than just homework." He was not sure how he was standing up to her on this. She took her schoolwork so seriously, he thought. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that reminders are helpful and I appreciate it, but I really only need one."

Hermione was starting to look upset. "You're saying that I'm nagging, aren't you?"

That was blunt and, to be honest, closer to the mark than Harry was willing to admit because he did not want to hurt her feelings. "Ron might say that, but you know how he is. I really do appreciate the reminders, because I do forget sometimes, but once you tell me, I make time for it and don't need to be told again half an hour later."

She looked at him carefully, still holding his hand. "You do have a slight point. I probably really don't need to tell you more than once a night, but you never seem to take your studies very seriously."

Harry sighed. "Some of that is because I don't know how."

"Some?" she asked.

"OK, a lot of it." He looked down, very embarrassed, not sure how he had managed to talk about this. "I do get distracted at times, but it's mostly that I don't know how."

"Why not?" Hermione asked, very concerned. "Didn't you learn in primary school?"

He shook his head, still looking down. "They didn't teach us how to do a lot of things, like writing essays. I think they might have starting doing that this year, but of course I didn't go there. And well, it was unhealthy for me to do too well in school."

Hermione thought about that. She had gone to a private primary

school and it was possible that she was taught extra things. But one thing he had said bothered her. "What do you mean, that it was 'unhealthy' for you to do well in school?"

"If I, uh, if I did too well and got better marks than my cousin, I got punished, and he wasn't very smart. So it was better if I just didn't try too hard or learn very much," he said quietly, hating to admit that.

Hermione reached out and grabbed his other hand. "Harry, I can help teach you what you missed. I know you'll pick it up because I can tell that you're smart too."

"Not as much as you..."

She sighed. "Whether you are or are not isn't the point. What matters is that you are smart enough to learn what you need to know and to learn how to make better grades." She paused and came to a few conclusions. "I'll make a deal with you, Harry."

"What?" He looked up at her for the first time since he had broached schoolwork with her.

"I'll teach you what you need to know to do better in school and I promise not be a slave driver. I'll teach you a little at a time."

He thought that was a pretty good offer, though the return part was missing. "OK," he offered to the first half.

"And I'll also stop nagging you and Ron, but in return," she smiled at him to make this easier to take, "I want you to promise to do your best in school. Just try very hard and I'll be happy, Harry. I think you'll be happy with your grades, too."

Harry thought about that a little longer. "OK, that seems fair. It will be hard to change, but I'll do it for you."

Hermione smiled brightly. "Just like I'll do my part because it's for you."

Harry returned her broad smile. This was how friends should work, he thought happily.

"Now, since we have that worked out, let's go to the library and figure out what's going on with us." She picked up her book bag and they started to leave.

"Thanks, Beaker!" Harry called and waved. Hermione echoed him. The elf looked happy and waved back, as did all the other elves there. Once outside the kitchens, Harry said, "They're a little weird, but fun."

Hermione shook her head. "It's all a matter of perspective, Harry. I'm sure they think we're weird."

He nodded as she did make sense.

They had to drop hands as they neared the library. Searching, it did not take long to find a table that was fairly isolated in the back. Hermione dropped her bag there and then led him to some shelves he had never visited before. She looked over the titles and started pulling a few out and handing them to him. Harry quickly understood that his job was to carry the books and did so. By the time she was done and leading him back to their table, he was holding eleven books. They sat down and Hermione's hand sought his out under the table. The contact reassured them both.

She handed him a book and quietly said, "Search through this looking for anything about bonds, or I think that would be the subject we need. If you find something about them but don't understand it, show it to me."

He nodded and got to work. He found a few things, but they did not seem to match what had happened to them. Harry showed her a few

passages, but she shook her head after glancing over them. Occasionally, she would stop and make a few notes, but she did not claim success.

By lunchtime, they had searched through all the books she had pulled out. Hermione had a page of notes. She had him carry all the books back over to the shelves and put them all back. That done, she grabbed her bag and they returned to the kitchens for lunch.

Beaker was there and served them lunch again, where they again held hands the whole time.

"I'm not sure what to say about what happened to us, Harry," Hermione said tiredly. "I don't understand why we couldn't find anything. It's not like magical bonds should be restricted knowledge," she huffed.

Harry considered what she had found. After reading over her notes, he had to agree that nothing she had found had described what had happened to them. "I guess we'll just have to keep searching. Maybe that bookstore in Diagon Alley might have something," he suggested.

Hermione brightened. "You're brilliant, Harry! See, you are smart."

Harry blushed but was secretly pleased.

"We can go there at Christmas." She was already planning it all out in her head.

"Err, 'we'?" he asked, very surprised.

"Sure. You can come home with me..."

"And meet your parents?" He almost squeaked.

"Of course, they are at home, Harry." She sounded a little

exasperated at his missing the obvious.

Harry knew they were nice people, from her descriptions, but to meet them? Now? When he could not go for more than a few minutes without touching their daughter?

"It will be fine, Harry. I promise that they'll love you," she reassured him.

"If you say so." He was still not convinced, but they were her parents, so she should know.

After lunch, they returned to their table in the back of the library. Hermione started teaching him how to research and then how to write essays. By the end of the afternoon, Harry was starting to understand how to write an essay. He knew he would need help for a while still, but he knew his next essay would be much improved over his old ones.

By dinner time, they decided they really should show up in the Great Hall, so they went straight there from the library. While they wanted to, they were unable to hold hands due to the number of people around. Each of them looked at the other and it was obvious the other was still uncomfortable.

"Hermione?" he whispered as they walked down the hall.

"Yes?" she answered in kind.

"I'm still having to restrain myself from grabbing your hand, but I think that maybe the feeling is starting to wear off. What do you think?" He watched her and hoped she felt the same, as it would mean they could act more normally.

Hermione looked very thoughtful. "Maybe I'm getting used to the feeling and so it's getting less, but it's hard to tell."

He nodded. "Maybe we'll be normal by morning."

She looked worried and as if she was struggling with something.

"What?"

"Harry, how do you feel about this? Will you not want me around as much by morning?"

He grabbed the sleeve of her robes and stopped her. "You'll always be my friend, Hermione, tomorrow morning and a long time from now."

"Thank you, Harry." She grabbed him in a quick hug, since no one was around. "You'll always be my friend."

"Is everything all right, Miss Granger, Mr Potter?" said a stern feminine voice a moment later, causing the two students to jump as well as turn very red.

"Y - Yes, Professor," Hermione said hurriedly and nervously. "I was telling Harry thank you for being a friend."

McGonagall looked at her two students and it was all she could do not to smirk given how embarrassed they looked. At eleven, it was all very innocent. If they had been fifth years or older, she would have asked some rather more pointed questions. "Friendship should always be valued and I'm happy you have made friends here, each of you."

Hermione smiled, glad the professor had not heard the rest of their conversation. "Professor, may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly, Miss Granger. I am your head Head of House." She wondered what the girl would ask this time.

"Professor, I've found out that some of us were taught how to write essays before we came here and some were not. Why doesn't Hogwarts offer a class to help those who don't know how to write, especially since most of our homework involves writing?"

McGonagall was surprised at the question and thought carefully about it. It was true that many students did a reasonable job with their homework, but the consensus among the staff was that those who did not do so well just needed extra time to adjust. Most students did acceptable work by the end of their second year. She had never put forth the idea that the problem might be one of training, nor had anyone else. If pressed, she would admit that the number of students handing in sub-standard work during the first year or two had been on the rise for a few years. She had attributed to that a temporary situation, but perhaps there was a bigger problem than she had realized.

"I'm afraid I've never considered that question, Miss Granger," McGonagall finally answered. "Why do you feel it's a problem?" The girl looked at Potter for a moment, and she saw him give the girl a slight nod. McGonagall found that interesting.

"I've just spent the afternoon teaching Harry how to write an essay," Hermione explained. "It wasn't taught at his primary school before he came here. That's probably true for other Muggle-born students, and I don't know about those who were raised in Wizarding homes."

"Most Wizarding families teach their children at home, and since they know essays are required at Hogwarts, they teach their children accordingly," McGonagall answered. "Of course," she thought out loud, "the proportion of Muggle-born students has been going up in recent years..." That could explain the trend she had seen. She nodded at the girl. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Miss Granger. Now, I believe dinner is about to start and we are near our destination."

"You're welcome, Professor." Hermione was happy the woman had listened. Hermione would help Harry regardless, but the other students like him deserved help too.

They were soon in the Great Hall and sitting beside one another. Hermione was not sure how they were going to do this, as they still wanted to touch, but it would be too obvious to hold hands under the table here as neither of them was left handed. Suddenly, she had an inspiration and leaned over and whispered into Harry's ear. "I'm going to cross my legs, which should put my foot near your knee. Casually reach down like you're putting your hand in your lap and push the cuff of my trousers up so you can touch my ankle."

Harry blushed and looked at her, not believing what he had just heard.

"Honestly, Harry," she quietly huffed, tickling his ear with her breath. "It's just my ankle and you have to do it since I'm on your left."

With a sheepish look, he reached down and moved the bottom of her robes and her trousers underneath up a little and put two fingers on her bare ankle. He did have to admit that it provided some relief. She smiled at him and he decided the embarrassment was worthwhile. It also made him wonder what witches wore under their robes. He wore a shirt and trousers.

They had just started eating when the rest of their year came in.

"Where have you been all day, Harry?" Ron asked, as if last night had not happened. "I didn't see you at breakfast or lunch either?"

"Yeah, mate, where'd you go?" Dean asked. He, Seamus, and Ron sat on the other side of the table from Harry and Hermione.

"Uh..." Harry looked at Hermione and she just looked at him, as if

wanting to see what he said. Gathering his Gryffindor courage, he said, "I've spent the day with Hermione. She's been teaching me how to do homework." That must have been a good answer as the girl beamed.

"How to do homework? Are you daft? Why would you want to waste time like that?" Ron asked, dismayed.

Harry felt his anger rising at what Ron said. He knew it was his new protective streak, but knowing did not stop him from reacting. "Well, Ron," Harry answered a little forcefully and with sarcasm, which made the red-haired boy look at him in surprise. "That would be because we're at a school and schools are meant to be a place where you learn things. Maybe you were lucky and had a family to teach you things like how to write an essay, but I did not."

"Harry, I..."

But Harry did not let him finish. "And furthermore, Ron, you should not be criticizing others considering what you did yesterday."

"Me? What did I do?" Ron looked truly bewildered.

"Yes, after what you did yesterday. You shouldn't even be speaking to Hermione until you apologize to her," Harry said, his voice still a little above normal, but not too loud.

"What are you talking about?" Ron looked at his other two friends and they seemed clueless as well.

"Maybe you should think about that, and if you still can't figure it out, talk to your parents, since they obviously didn't teach you at least one thing," Harry practically hissed, trying to keep his voice down but still show how upset he was. Part of him knew he was going overboard, but because of what Ron did, Hermione almost got killed and he would not let that happen again.

Whatever Ron might have said was prevented by Professor McGonagall standing and tapping her knife on her goblet.

"May I have your attention please?"

Harry found it interesting that even the Headmaster looked like he did not know what was about to happen.

"It has been brought to my attention that not everyone was taught the same skills before they came to Hogwarts. Therefore, I would like to take a survey for planning purposes. There is no right or wrong answer to this question, so please do not feel embarrassed with your answer. I would like a show of hands from all the students if you did not learn how to write essays before you started school here. Hands up please, and hold them up, if you had to learn about writing essays at Hogwarts."

McGonagall looked around and was amazed that over a third of the students had raised their hands, including Harry's she noticed. More than half of the students with raised hands were Muggle-born, but there was a sizeable number of half-bloods and even a few purebloods with their hands raised.

"Very good. I will assume the rest of you were taught before you came. Now, same question for just the first and second years. If you did not learn how to write essays before you came, please raise your hand." She counted. "And if you did learn how before you came here, please raise your hand." She counted again, and noted that Miss Granger had her hand up now. She was slightly distressed to find that almost half of the newer students lacked this skill. "Thank you for your help, please resume your dinner."

As she sat, Dumbledore leaned over and quietly asked, "What prompted that?"

"As I said, it was a matter brought to my attention. I have wondered why the first-years have been doing more poorly over the last five years or so, and I believe I now have an idea why. Albus, we need to have some remedial classes for writing. It is not fair to the students to ask them to write essays for homework if they don't know how to write an essay."

The man thought about it for a moment as he watched a small disturbance narrowly be avoided. "I noticed that most of the students who lacked the skill were Muggle-born," he casually commented.

"Albus! Surely you, of all people, would not discriminate!"

He smiled and slowly shook his head. "Of course not, Minerva. I was merely making an observation that a change in Muggle society is affecting us here." Before she could say anything else, he added, "I will leave this in your hands, but I would suggest that a few Saturday sessions that do not coincide with Quidditch matches might be a good time for these remedial lessons."

McGonagall breathed a little easier. "Thank you, Albus. If this works out well, I'll schedule the same lessons for the first-years next September."

Dumbledore's eyes lit in their own smile. "A capital ideal, Minerva."

As the survey finished, Hermione happened to catch Ron's expression. He had a big smile on his face and he was looking at Harry.

"Well, Harry, I guess that --"

"Ron!" Hermione hissed and glared at him, causing the boy to instantly shut up and look at her. "If what you were about to say is in any way disparaging towards Harry, you better not finish saying it

unless you want to lose your manhood." She continued the glare and watched Ron gulp.

"Uh, what does 'disparaging' mean?" Ron asked weakly.

"She means you better not be saying anything bad about Harry," Seamus helpfully answered.

Ron licked his lips and gulped. "I, uh, err, I don't think it would be, but I'll just keep it to myself anyway," he said nervously.

Hermione had watched his changing expressions, as well as noticing that he was taking short and shallow breaths. In her opinion, that meant he was lying. She wanted to teach him a lesson but kept that feeling controlled. "That's probably a wise decision, Ron," she said very evenly. Ron seemed to get the message as he looked down and would not look at her again. She glanced at Harry's plate and noticed that he was almost done. "Hurry up and finish, Harry. I'm ready to go." She gave a distasteful look across the table and saw Harry nod out of the corner of her eye.

A few minutes later, Harry removed his hand from her ankle and stood without saying a word. Hermione followed suit and they returned to Gryffindor Tower at a fast walk. In the corridor, Hermione let her anger show. "That idiot has no control over his tongue. I wonder if he's ever engaged his brain before talking."

Harry glanced around and saw no one else at the moment, so he grabbed her hand and pulled her into a side passageway behind a tapestry. "Hermione," he whispered. "It's OK. I can't imagine he would've said anything I haven't heard before. It's not big deal."

That seemed to be the wrong thing to say, as she became angrier. "That's beside the point. If Ron was really your friend, he wouldn't say bad things about you, just like he shouldn't about me, if he was really my friend. Don't you see, Harry? He lied to us! I could tell he

was about to say something bad to you, and then he had the gall to tell me it wasn't bad and then wouldn't look me in the eye." She was practically steaming.

"Gall?" Harry asked in confusion.

"Purposefully irritating or vexing," she snapped. The second she said it, she wished she had not. Without waiting for any response from him, she quickly hugged him. "I'm sorry, Harry, I didn't mean to snap at you. I'm just so angry at Ron." She sniffled once. "This is why I went and hid in the bathroom all day. I didn't want to be seen like this and now I'm making you deal with it. I should warn you that I have a ... a fierce temper when it gets out of control, so I try to let it out as little as possible."

Harry felt badly for her and hugged her back, being sure to touch her neck. The comfort of each other returned. "It's going to be OK, Hermione. I don't know how, but we'll find a way to make it OK."

His touch felt so good to her and it was just what she needed. She thought of herself as strong, but it was times like this that showed her how she was weak. Maybe this bond they had was a good thing. They could cover each other's weak spots. "Thank you, Harry."

"Any time, Hermione. And so you know, my temper isn't easily controlled either. I can hold it in most of the time, but I have accidental magic when it comes out," he admitted.

"We can help each other then," she told him. "I don't want to, but we should be getting back so we don't break curfew," she said half-heartedly. "It will be nice when we're in third year and curfew is an hour later."

He nodded and slowly released her. It was not until they were about to leave the passageway that Harry noticed something. "Hermione? I, uh, I'd still like to hold your hand, but I don't feel as bad now if I'm

not."

She looked at him thoughtful, obviously searching her feelings. "You're right. I think I'd still like to sleep in the common room again where we did last night. I think I'd sleep a lot better that way."

Harry grinned. "I'd like that, too. Come on."

They hurried back. There were enough people around that they felt like they could not hold hands, so they each went up to their rooms and got a book. Sitting closely on a couch, they "accidentally" let their bare arms touch as they read.

Percy shooed them up to their dorm rooms later, but they came back down a half hour afterwards, each with their own pillow and Hermione with a blanket too. Like the night before, they got comfortable in the corner behind a pair of chairs and slept holding hands.

Early the next morning, Harry woke feeling refreshed. It was not until he stretched that he realized he was not touching Hermione in any way. Puzzled that he did not feel uncomfortable, he reached down and gently touched her hand as she slept. He could tell the moment he touched her, as he felt a little more comfortable, but it was very slight. Generally, they could function normally. He was not sure how he felt about that, as he had liked having her close by. After thinking about it for awhile, he finally realized that this was probably for the best, as they could now act normally.

Harry also tried closing his eyes and thinking about her very hard, and he could still "feel" her. She felt "normal" to him and he knew she was right beside him, so that had not gone away. He also felt a wave of pleasure and belonging when thinking about her, much like yesterday. So apparently, the only thing they had lost was the need to touch.

He looked at her and watched her sleep for a few minutes. The sense of belonging came back and he felt "warm" inside. He wondered if this was what it was like to have a family. If it was, Harry decided he liked it and wanted to keep it.

Hermione stirred and rolled over from her side to her back, her hair going everywhere. Harry thought it was sort of cute. She blinked at him and smiled, so he smiled back.

"Morning," he quietly said. "How do you feel?"

She blinked again, thinking carefully. "I feel good. How about you?"

He grinned at her. "I feel good too. I think this is our new normal." At her quizzical look, he held up both of his hands.

Her eyes widened as she realized what he meant. Hermione realized they were not touching. She closed her eyes again and her face scrunched up slightly.

Harry realized she was doing the same as he had, so he just sat there. A moment later, he saw her relax.

"I liked that feeling, but this will make it easier to function," she stated.

"It will," he agreed.

She looked out from behind the chairs. "It's still early. We should go to bed and sleep for an hour or two longer. That will look more normal. We can talk about this some more after breakfast."

He nodded.

"Have you done all of your homework for the next few days?" she asked.

"Um..." He tilted his head as he thought. "All except for History."

"Right. We can go to the library after breakfast and you can finish that while I research house-elves. I want to know more about what Beaker said. After you finish, I'll show you some of the things I do to revise. If you weren't taught how to do essays, then I doubt you were shown how to be prepared for class so you can do your best." She had stated that, but then looked at him questioningly.

"I wasn't shown much," he confessed, looking down a little.

"It's not your fault you weren't shown, Harry," she tried to comfort him. "I'll help you learn how to do your best, whatever that is." He scrutinized her. "Yes, Harry, I don't expect you to be like me. We're all different. However, I do expect you to do your best."

"And have some fun, too?" he asked, wondering what she would say.

Hermione gave him a smile and leaned over and gave him a short hug. "Yes, Harry. Some fun is appropriate. You can stay on the Quidditch team; I wouldn't ask you to quit. I'm only trying to point out that I think you can do better in class with a little more work. Playing chess with Ron," she muttered, "if you still want to," before she went on normally, "or Exploding Snap, or whatever else you like should not distract you from your school work."

"I understand." He really did understand too, and he wanted to make her proud of him, like he had never been able to do for his aunt.

Harry stood and helped her up. They each went to their dorm rooms to do what they planned.

By lunchtime they found that the special feeling that came when they touched was completely gone. However, Harry also found that he was still very protective of her. One glance at her by Malfoy had his

blood pressure up. Fortunately, nothing came of that.

((A/N: There's the beginning and the basic premise. I hope you enjoy the story. -- Kevin))

Chapter 2 - The Grangers

On Monday morning, Harry and Hermione went to class as usual with no one being the wiser as to what had occurred to them on Halloween evening. They stayed near each other now, but did not hold hands or otherwise do anything special. No matter where they went, Harry always knew where Hermione was and she always knew where he was. It was becoming instinctual for each of them.

By the time Potions was to start, they had dealt with most of their new feelings and were at ease with them. Then they ran into Draco Malfoy outside the classroom as they all waited for Snape to open the door.

"Well, well, well," Malfoy drawled, as he looked Harry and Hermione over. "I see you're standing closer to the Mudblood now, Potter. How much did she have to pay you?" He was smirking and looking to his friends so he did not see the anger appear on Harry's face. Only Hermione's arm on his and a whisper from her saved the Slytherin.

"No, Harry," she quickly whispered. "Remember, I really don't care what he calls me. Besides, I can take care of him in my own way when I need to." Harry subsided enough to control himself.

Malfoy was not done with them yet. "Or have you finally realized, Potter, how stupid you are, so you need at least one friend to take with you when they expel you?"

Now Hermione started to get angry. Harry put a hand on her arm. "I'll never be as stupid and unnatural as you are Malfoy." The Slytherin bristled. "At least I have a friend who is a girl. Who do you have, Malfoy? All I ever see you with is two boys."

Whatever Malfoy might have said or done was interrupted by Snape opening the door to the classroom. "Everyone, get in and take your places." There was a small rush through the door to comply. Harry

and Draco eyed each other warily.

Snape spent a few minutes lecturing about a burn salve before everyone was sent to a work table to brew one. As usual, he stalked around the room, offering advice to the Slytherins and taking points from the Gryffindors. Neville got lucky when his salve turned hard instead of exploding. The result was the same: a zero for the day.

While Harry was trying to finish up his salve, he noticed something flying through the air towards his cauldron. Without thought, his hand snapped up and blocked the object, causing it to fall to the floor. He would have caught it, but it was pointy and hurt the palm of his hand.

"What's this?" Snape demanded as he turned around and looked down at the object near Harry's feet. "A thistle pod? What were you planning on doing with this, Mr Potter? Do you even realize how much this could have hurt someone if you had thrown it into a cauldron?"

Harry worked hard to maintain a calm expression. "I didn't, sir. Someone threw it at my cauldron and I blocked it."

Snape sneered. "A likely story. That will be twenty points from Gryffindor for lying and detention tonight for trying to sabotage someone else's work."

Harry took a breath to tell Snape that it was the truth, when he felt a hand on the middle of his back make a small rubbing motion. Suddenly feeling a little calmer, he only said, "Sir," as an acknowledgement.

Snape looked down upon him for a moment longer before pulling his wand out and Vanishing the thistle pod on the floor and returning to the front of the class. "Everyone, turn in your work with your name on it."

Harry turned and saw Hermione looking at him with a pleased look on her face. "When we're outside, Harry," she quietly told him. He nodded and they turned in their work and left the classroom.

He started to ask her what she was thinking when she led them both away from the crowd going to the Great Hall for lunch. Instead, he asked, "Where are we going?"

Hermione stopped and looked at him. "I finally realized what a poor teacher Professor Snape really is today. He may be a master at brewing potions, but he is a poor teacher. My parents raised me to talk to them when I had trouble with a teacher. I can write them, but we were also told when we came here that we have a family at school, and we need to talk to the head of our family."

With that said, she turned and started walking again. She was going fast enough that Harry had to run a few steps to catch up. He was not sure what she meant, but she obviously had an idea what to do about Snape and he wanted to see what it was.

A few moments later, they were standing outside Professor McGonagall's classroom. She was still inside, seated at her desk, her last class having already left for lunch.

Hermione knocked on the doorframe. "Professor? May we have a few minutes of your time?"

McGonagall looked up, surprised to see them there. "Of course, Miss Granger, Mr Potter. Please come in."

"Harry, please close the door," Hermione said as she went to the front, taking the desk directly in front of her head of house. Harry joined her a few seconds later.

"How may I help you, Miss Granger?" It was obvious that Hermione was the reason the two students were there.

"Professor, I would like to protest a punishment given to a student and ask that it be reversed," she boldly stated.

McGonagall was shocked. Hermione had never, to her knowledge, gone against anything a teacher had said or done. "I see. Can you please tell me what happened and where it happened?"

Hermione explained about what went on in their Potions class in precise detail.

"Is that true, Mr Potter?" McGonagall asked after a moment.

"Yes, Professor. You can even see the prickles on my hand from where it hit." He showed the palm of his left hand and there was indeed five red spots grouped together in the middle of his palm.

McGonagall took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "You ask a difficult thing, Miss Granger. The normal policy is that a teacher is in charge of his or her classroom; therefore, whatever Professor Snape says or does in his classroom is not changed by any other teacher, just like he can not change what happens in my classroom."

Hermione was not happy to hear that. "Is that still true even when the teacher lies and unjustly punishes a student?"

McGonagall rubbed her right temple. She was in a difficult spot, and she mostly blamed the Headmaster for that at the moment. "Ideally, that should never happen, Miss Granger, but I understand that it could."

"And what are we students to do, in such a situation? Others in the class saw it. Is there an official complaint process?" Hermione pressed.

"Yes. In the case that the student feels a severe injustice was done,

there is an official complaint process," McGonagall reluctantly admitted, knowing this was going to create a lot of problems. On the other hand, perhaps it was time to cross this bridge and for Albus to be forced to do the right thing. "Mr Potter would have to fill the complaint form out and get it signed by his guardian before we could start."

Harry sighed and looked down. "Well, that kills it. My aunt would probably congratulate Snape for what he does to me."

McGonagall managed to freeze her expression as she thought about what he had said. She hoped he was exaggerating.

Hermione was incensed. "So," she ground out, "because Harry's relatives don't care what happens to him, there's nothing he can do to have this injustice fixed or even to protect himself from Professor Snape?"

"Unless it can be shown that Professor Snape purposefully tried to injure him, that is correct. I'm sorry, Miss Granger, but the policies assume there is a caring parent or legal guardian." When neither student said anything more, she told them. "I would suggest you do as Professor Snape asks in class, and otherwise avoid him. Unless you have another issue, you should hurry to lunch, as it will be almost half over by the time you get there."

Hermione was not happy, but she realized there was nothing else to be done at the moment. "Thank you for the information, Professor." She got up and left; Harry dutifully followed her.

In the corridor, she turned to Harry and gave him a hug, not knowing if it was more for him or for her. "That is so unfair," she told him before she let go and started slowly walking to lunch. "There must be something we can do."

"It doesn't sound like it," Harry said dejectedly. He was surprised at

what Hermione was doing for him, but he also considered that if their positions had been reversed, he would have done the same for her. He looked at her and gave her a grateful smile. "Thanks for trying."

She blushed slightly but did not look away. After a moment, her smile broadened.

"What?" he asked.

"We need to trade places in class, Harry. That will put me closer to Malfoy and then if he tried to throw anything into your cauldron, it would probably hit mine instead." She was very pleased with her idea.

"But, Hermione..."

"No, Harry, don't you see? I would have no problem getting my parents to sign a complaint form."

That bothered Harry. "Hermione, no! I can't let you get hurt like that."

"Harry, in the Potions classroom, I can protect myself better than you can. If something does go into my caldron, I can counteract it."

"Assuming you have time and it doesn't explode," Harry muttered. "I still don't like it," he told her fervently.

She smiled and reached out to quickly squeeze his hand. "I know, because I want to protect you too, but trust me, Harry. Trust me like I trust you."

Harry stopped just before they walked into the Great Hall. "It's hard, Hermione," he quietly told her. "I've never had anyone I can trust before."

Hermione controlled her emotions as best she could; she did not

want to burst into tears at the moment. "Try your best to give me the chance, Harry. Feel what we have. When I think about you, I know I can trust you."

He nodded. "I know; I feel it too. That's why I've shared so much with you, but it's such a new feeling. It's just my habit not to trust anyone."

"I know you can do it, Harry, just give it time. Now come on, we need to quickly eat." She led him to the Great Hall.

As they sat at the table, Ron looked at them. "Where have you been?"

"Elsewhere," Harry said curtly, his anger quickly rising against his so-called friend for what he had done to his real best friend.

Ron looked perplexed. "What did I do?" he asked the table at large, but Harry answered him.

"You owe Hermione something before you can expect anything from us," he said a little fiercely, leaving Ron as confused as before. Harry then ignored the boy and started on lunch. Hermione said nothing.

It had been a long seven weeks since Halloween, and both Harry and Hermione were looking forward to Christmas break. Classes went on as normal, with Potions continuing to be the worst. They had tried to switch places, but Snape had not let them. Malfoy had tried to ruin Harry's work by adding foreign substances to Harry's cauldron, but he had missed both times. While Harry had avoided detention for each of those attempts, he had lost another forty points, not including all of the other points Harry had lost for other supposed misdeeds. Throughout it all, Hermione was supportive and documented it all.

After the discussion with McGonagall, Hermione had written her parents a long letter. In it, she had explained about her new friend in

detail, minus the information about their connection. She was sure they were not ready to hear that their twelve year-old daughter was now magically bound to an eleven year-old boy. She was also sure she could not adequately explain it either. All of her searching in the library had turned up nothing useful.

She had one last task before they left for the holidays and she embarked on it immediately after breakfast in the hour before the train left for London. Harry had her travel bag and her book bag and was waiting for her in the Entrance Hall. Armed with a note, should she need it, she knocked on Professor McGonagall's door.

"Miss Granger. What can I do for you?"

"Professor, I would like to either have or borrow a copy of the school policies for the Professors. I looked and did not find it in the library."

McGonagall pursed her lips as she thought. Yet again, Hermione was asking a difficult question. "Why don't you come in, Miss Granger?"

"As long as it doesn't take too long, Professor. The train leaves in an hour." She did her best to not appear impatient.

"I shall try to be brief then. Why do you want the teacher's manual, Miss Granger? That is not something we normally give to students." Minerva had an idea, but needed to hear it for herself.

"My mother has requested to look at it. If I were at the school I would have gone to had I not come to Hogwarts, those policies would have been easily available to her by going to the school. Since she can not come here, I'm forwarding her request," Hermione explained, hoping she looked more calm and poised than she felt.

Minerva had guessed correctly. "I see. If your mother was here, I could let her look at my copy."

Knowing it was going to be necessary now, and mentally thankful for her mother's foresight, Hermione pulled out the note and handed it over. "A note from my mother requesting to borrow it. She will give it to me to return when I come back after the holiday."

McGonagall read the note and found it as the girl had said. "Very well, Miss Granger. Since your parents can't easily visit me, I shall lend you my copy. Please see that you return it to me after the holidays." She went over to a shelf, pulled a slim book out, and handed it to the girl.

"Thank you, Professor. I'll see that it's well taken care of."

"I'm sure you will. One last question before you leave, Miss Granger." She had wondered something and this would be her only chance to find out.

"Certainly, Professor." Hermione wondered what her teacher wanted to know. She had a look that appeared both curious and as if she did not want to know the answer.

"Can you tell me why Mr Potter is going home for the holidays if he does not like his relatives?" McGonagall watched the girl carefully and saw several expressions cross her face, including one that she interpreted as considering to lie.

After a moment, Hermione said, "Harry has made an arrangement with them that will allow both parties to enjoy Christmas, at least much as is possible. Beyond that, I'm sure it's not my place to say."

Minerva easily recognized the careful wording and wondered what was being avoided. "So he does have his guardian's permission to leave Hogwarts."

"Yes, Professor," she replied with a straight face and no hesitation. Harry did have a letter from his aunt. It said that he could spend it

anywhere he wanted, as long as it was not with them.

"Very well. I was concerned for him." There was no more that could be easily asked. "I wish both of you a Happy Christmas," McGonagall said with a gentle voice and a nod of the head.

"Thank you, Professor. Happy Christmas to you as well." Hermione beat a hasty but orderly retreat, quickly walking to meet her friend and the train.

Minerva McGonagall slowly closed the door after one of her favourite students and thoughtfully considered the conversation. With a shake of her head, she said to herself, "Albus, I believe you will have an interesting new year." Grabbing another cup of hot tea, she made herself comfortable in front of her warm fire and tried to finish the last of her grading before lunch.

Hermione and Harry had spent an enjoyable trip with Neville Longbottom in their compartment. Neville had been quite shy at first, but they had finally gotten him to talk by asking about Christmas traditions in the Wizarding World. Since he was the only one there with that knowledge, he was soon so wrapped up in telling them everything that he forgot to be nervous. The other two learned a lot.

The conversation had done one other thing, besides being educational and passing the time. It had stopped Harry from thinking about meeting Hermione's parents until they arrived at King's Cross. However, when they arrived at the train station, he almost went into a panic.

"Harry, calm down," Hermione admonished him. "Mum has already said how much she wants to meet you."

"It's not your mum I'm afraid to meet," he said weakly, walking as

slowly as he could towards the barrier between Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ and the Muggle side of the station.

"Don't worry, Harry. Mum said that Dad wants to meet you too." Her comforting words were not taken as such by her best friend.

"That's what I'm afraid of." Harry stopped three steps in front of the barrier and refused to walk any further.

"Harry," she said with much exasperation, "don't make a mountain out of a mole-hill. They will like you or I'll be very unhappy with them. Come!" She grabbed his hand and pulled him forward after her.

His heart swelled as he thought about her caring enough to stand up to her parents for not liking him. He almost stumbled as she pulled him, but he kept up and put on his bravest face as they went through the portal to the rest of the train station.

Just on the other side he got his first look at them in person. He easily recognized them since she had shown him pictures of her family a few weeks ago. As they approached her parents, he realized she was still holding his hand, but he could not disengage without hurting her feelings. He also realized that her parents were looking at their hands as well.

Hermione finally let go when they got close. "Mum!" She gave her mother a hug. "Dad!" Her father received a hug as well.

Harry took in her parents. Her mother was like an older Hermione in many ways -- same build, same colour of hair, and even same type of hair, although her mother wore hers longer and seemed to have a little more control over it. She looked fairly average, attractive but average. Her father was several inches taller than her mother. He had a distinguished look with a slight greying at the temples of his medium brown hair. He also looked to be in decent shape; there was no beer belly on him. Harry could see Hermione had his eyes and tall

forehead, even though his friend looked mostly like her mother.

Hermione took a step back next to Harry. "This is my best friend, Harry Potter."

"Hello, Harry. I've heard so much about you." Mrs Granger stepped forward and gave Harry a gentle hug. "I'm glad you could come spend the holidays with us."

"Thank you, Mrs Granger," he told her shyly.

"Think nothing of it." She turned slightly. "This is my husband, Dan, and I'm Emma."

"Hello, Harry," the man said simply and gave him a firm handshake, which Harry did his best to return. "Now that we know one another, how about we go find the car? Let me get your bag, Kitten," Dan told his daughter.

"Daaad," she complained as if scandalized, instantly going red.

Her father grabbed her bag of clothes with one hand and put one arm over her shoulder that was carrying her book bag. "I'm sure Harry will understand and recognize you by either name," he said with a teasing smile.

As they took the lead, Emma fell in step with Harry, who carried his single bag. "Did you not bring your bag of clothes too?"

Harry smiled at the question, wondering just how much his friend was probably like her mother. "Uh, no. I put all of my clothes in with my school things in my book bag."

"Oh," she smiled. "You pack more efficiently than my daughter."

"I probably have fewer things," he said, not sure of what he should

say.

"I hope you don't mind, but I asked Hermione a few things about you so I could prepare better. You know, favourite foods or anything you're allergic to."

He could not help but smile. The thought of having someone care enough to ask about what he liked was a marvel. "No, I don't mind at all. You're very thoughtful," he blushed and quietly added, "just like Hermione."

Emma gave him a wry smile. "I do like to hope that I've raised her well."

"She's the best." When he noticed her giving him an inquisitive look, he hastily added, "She's my best friend and I couldn't imagine how she could be any better." That seemed to satisfy the woman.

"Over here," Dan said as he weaved his way through the cars in the car park. A moment later, they were behind a shiny black BMW. He opened the boot of the car and the kids put their bags in. A minute later, he was driving the family towards home.

During the drive, there was much conversation between the three Grangers concerning the holidays, mostly asking Hermione about what she wanted to do. Harry had no opinion, when asked about favourite traditions, since he had none. He saw Emma frown at that, but it was very brief and he was not totally sure he had really seen her do that.

In what seemed like no time, they had arrived at a nice neighbourhood of older houses that were well maintained. They were much larger than the house the Dursleys lived in and much more distinctive. Dan pulled into the driveway of an immaculate two-storey house with large trees. They grabbed their bags and went in.

"Show Harry to the blue guest room, dear," Emma told her daughter. "After you've dropped your things off, please come right back down. Dinner should be ready in a few minutes."

Harry was impressed with the guest room. It was as big as his aunt's bedroom and better furnished. Hermione took a moment to show him her room. Other than the pictures of a few cats doing funny things on the walls, it would have been hard to tell if the room belonged to a boy or a girl. In a way, he was not surprised.

Downstairs, Harry found Emma carrying dishes of food to the dining room, which was set with expensive looking dishes, silverware, and crystal.

"I hope you're impressed, Harry," Hermione whispered to him. "Mum pulled out the good stuff for you."

He looked embarrassed and started to protest, but Hermione giggled and grinned at him, effectively shutting him up.

"Have a seat, Harry," Dan waved him to the setting that was by itself on one side. Dan took the chair on the end, leaving two settings across from Harry for the two Granger women. All four place settings were at one end of the table. "I hope you don't mind this arrangement. It's part of the hazards of having a larger table."

Harry shook his head as he took his place at the long table that could comfortably seat twelve. Emma started passing the food around.

Harry took a little bit of everything, and found it good. "This is wonderful, as good as we get at school," he told her enthusiastically.

Emma looked at her daughter.

"It is very good, Mum. The fact that you can cook as well as magical elves that specialize in cooking is something to be proud of,"

Hermione explained.

"Thank you, Harry," she said graciously, now that she understood. "Please tell me about your school year so far and how you like Hogwarts. Feel free to tell me anything. Even if Hermione has told me, I'm sure your perspective will be different."

Harry was not sure how to answer as the term had been very mixed, he thought. Hermione gave him an encouraging smile. "I, uh, I've liked most of it so far. The school's very nice, great even. It's a real castle with everything you'd expect inside. There are suits of armour in the corridor, gargoyles on the outside, ghosts gliding around. The magic in it is awesome. I feel like it's my new home."

"That's good to hear," Dan told him. "How do you feel about the classes? Are you learning what you thought you would?"

Harry thought that a strange question until he remembered her parents probably knew very little about the Wizarding world, just like he had not until what seemed like a few short months ago. "Most of my classes are all right. I'm learning some cool things and Hermione has been helping me a lot. I know how to study much better after her tutoring." He gave her a slightly bashful smile, which she returned.

"What do you think of your teachers?" Emma asked him, looking at him curiously but not threateningly.

He knew he was being grilled, at least on some level, but they were so nice about it he did not care. "Most of them are nice and seem very knowledgeable. I'm only in first year, so it's hard to know how good they really are."

Emma looked at Harry's plate and saw that it was empty. "Harry, I have some treacle tart. Hermione said it was your favourite. Would you like some?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She smiled and got up to get the dish, back after only a few seconds. As she set it down in front of him, she asked. "I've noticed that you've answered that most or many things were good, implying that some were not. If you would, could you please tell me what is not so good or what is not going right?"

Harry froze with his fork embedded in the dessert on his plate. He glanced up at Hermione who had a slightly surprised look.

"Please, Harry," Dan coaxed him. "Hermione has told us of some things in her letters and we'd like to hear your view. You're not in trouble in any way. We just want to know and we might be able to help you."

"Help me?" he almost squeaked.

Emma sighed and put her fork down, while giving Harry a caring smile. "Harry, Hermione sent us a letter explaining a few things about one of your classes and honestly, Dan and I are appalled. We know that some things will be done differently at your school just because it's magical. We understand that it's a different world. One we have to keep secret, but we're a part of it too, thanks to Hermione. Dan and I are on the very fringe of it, but that does not stop us from loving our daughter any less, or from accepting her friends. Things may be a little different at your new school, but some things are the same for all schools. I'm sorry if you feel put on the spot, but we'd really like to know how you feel. If you want to wait a few days to get to know us before you answer, we understand and we'll be patient, but we really do want to know and it is possible that we may be able to help you, but that's if you'll tell us. We can't help with what we don't know about."

Harry twisted his fork in his dessert, playing with his food as his aunt would have said, while he thought. He again looked up at Hermione

and saw a hopeful look on her face, one that seemed to say that she thought he could do this.

He reached out for his water and took a sip and saw his hand shake ever so slightly. Why was this so frightening, he asked himself, but no answer came. "It really is better than before, when I was with my relatives," he started off slowly, looking at his mangled tart. "The food really is good and I can eat as much as I want. The others stare at me a lot, but I can mostly ignore them. I do like the classes, but two of the teachers are ... well, they're not the best." He moved his fork around on his plate and wondered if he was making any sense at all.

"Please tell me about those two classes," Emma gently said. Dan had agreed with her that she should be the one to ask. Even when he tried to stay low key, Dan's voice sometimes boomed. Emma also looked over to her daughter and shook her head slightly, as it appeared that Hermione was about to say something.

"History of Magic is pretty useless since almost none of us can stay awake in it. Did you know it's taught by a ghost?" Harry looked to Emma, who smiled encouragingly and nodded. "Hermione taught me how to stay awake in class, even though I don't think she meant to do it."

"Harry..." Hermione quietly pleaded.

Emma almost laughed and wondered what he would say. "What did she teach you?" she asked with a light voice, just on the edge of laughter. Hermione hung her head.

"She said that all the good information is in the book, so I just ignore the boring teacher and read the book in class. My marks are better, too," he said with a grin.

Emma chuckled. "I'm happy for you, Harry." When he did not say anything for a moment, she asked, "What about the other class?" His

face instantly fell and she wondered if he would say anything more.

"Potions," he suddenly said, as if forced. "Snape is an egotistical, mean, and a slimy..." He stopped as suddenly as he had started. "I'm sorry, I'm being rude."

"No, you're not. You're being very forthright and I appreciate that," Emma told him in a no-nonsense way. "Please continue. What has Potions been like for you?"

It took a long moment, but Harry finally continued. "It's been horrible, and worse yet, I can't even file an official complaint because my aunt won't sign the form." He angrily stabbed some of the tart and ate a bite, as if he was taking his anger out on it.

Emma looked over to her husband and saw the same anguish on his face as she felt. Hermione had told them a little about Harry, his time with his relatives, and his Potions class, but to hear it first hand and to see his expressions were heart-wrenching. She was also sure that they had only heard the tip of the iceberg of the tales. Hoping this was the right thing to do, she again tried to project calm and care. "Harry, what if there was a way to fix that? Would you want to?"

Harry looked up startled with hope on his face for a brief instant, before it was gone and his head went back down, looking forlorn. "It would be a nice dream, but it will never happen."

"Harry, it's possible if you want it to," Dan said, surprising Harry since he had not spoken recently.

"How? How is it possible? I doubt the Dursleys would agree, as much as they hate me, and I'm sure Dumbledore would never agree."

"Why do you think Dumbledore wouldn't agree? Has he said something specific to you about it? Or is there any reason for him to have a say about this at all? Is he more than just a Headmaster to

you?" Dan asked, trying hard to make sure his voice did not rise in his anger at the situation of the young man.

"Because he put me there," Harry said dejectedly.

"Have you seen your parents' will, Harry?"

"No, sir."

"I, I ..." Dan stopped before he continued in a more strangled voice. "Emma, you better continue. I'm too angry at some professors right now."

She nodded, understanding fully. "Harry, please don't be angry at Hermione, but she told us of your bad Potions class and not being able to file a complaint."

He shook his head. "It's OK, a lot of people know about that class."

"Thank you, and I hope this is all right too, because we checked into a few things in an effort to help you." Emma was on tenterhooks now, wondering if he would accept them and their help or if she was about to destroy a new friendship.

"What?" Harry asked guardedly.

"You know there are lots of records at the government offices, right? You know, birth certificates, school records, things like that." Harry nodded, so Emma continued. "We asked someone to check that sort of thing for you and we found something very interesting that may help you."

Harry thought about that and he was not sure what to think of them doing that without asking him. They had searched for personal information about him, which felt somewhat wrong, and yet they had found something and were trying to help him. Perhaps most

importantly, they were telling him directly about everything. It even sounded like they were going to give him choices.

"Please, Harry?"

His head snapped up to look at his friend, his bond-partner, pleading with him.

"Please, Harry?" Hermione again said in a small voice. "I don't know what they found yet either, but please give them a chance. They really are only trying to help. I know they wouldn't hurt you."

He trusted Hermione implicitly now, so he looked to her mother and nodded, not trusting his voice.

"Thank you, Harry," Emma said, grateful for the chance, and hoping this all worked out. "You were born Harry James Potter to James Edward Potter and to Lily Marie Evans Potter, both of Godric's Hollow, and that is recorded in the government records. Oh," she stopped herself, "everything I'm going to tell you is with the Queen's government. This has nothing to do with the Magical government."

Harry nodded.

"So you have a recorded birth here, which makes you a British citizen. There is no other record until you started Primary school. Those records indicate you attended your school for five years, and that is all. There is nothing else known about you, which is a problem and why you have a chance to change things."

"I don't understand," Harry asked, lost at what her point might be.

"The problem did not become known until we start tracing the records for your parents," Emma explained. "As I said, we have your birth record. The search also turned up your parent's death certificates, and we are sorry they aren't here for you."

"Thank you," he mumbled.

"There are no other records, Harry."

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand." He was really confused.

"The problem is that there should be a record showing your custody and the assignment of a legal guardian, but there is not. We checked with the appropriate government people and they are alarmed at the ten year oversight and have offered to correct it immediately, with the guardians of your choice," Emma explained. She and Dan had already passed the checks; it was mostly up to Harry now.

Hermione gasped and Harry looked to her. "Harry, you can fix it all. You can have a real legal guardian with people who will love you and sign all the forms you'll ever want." Tears were starting to spill down her cheeks. "Oh, Harry, I'm so happy for you. Please say yes, please!"

Harry looked around. Emma was smiling at him and even Dan looked happy now.

"I don't understand..."

"Harry," Hermione almost shouted. "Mum and Dad are offering to become your legal guardians."

Now Harry gasped. "Seriously?"

Dan laughed, "Yes, Harry, seriously. No young man should have to endure what you do and we'd like to fix that."

"But, but what about the Dursleys?" He was grateful, very grateful for the offer, but he could not imagine this could really happen.

"Yes, the Dursleys," Emma said with an almost feral smile. "When we asked about other relatives, we were told that because they did not come forth and officially register your placement as was required, they would lose any custody battle, or so our solicitor assures us, and he is very, very good. If that is not enough, Hermione has also told us that life with the Dursleys was not a good one for you."

Harry sucked in air in fear of what they might have heard.

Emma smiled reassuringly at him. "Please don't worry, Harry. I don't know any details. All she would say is that your relatives should be behind bars, and I don't think she would say that if it wasn't true. Is it true?" she gently asked.

"I, I don't know," Harry finally answered. "I thought all homes were that way."

Dan growled quietly, but it was still audible. When Harry looked at him, he closed his eyes and breathed deeply. "Harry, I'm very sorry if I'm making you uncomfortable, but this affects me deeply. My father was abused as a child and while he was not a totally bad father to me, he did have his moments where anger got the best of him and he would come after my brother and me. Because of that, I've vowed I would never treat my daughter like that and it pains me to see any child purposefully hurt. I'm not angry at you, but I am angry at your situation and the adults who let that happen." He opened his eyes. "Do you understand the difference?"

Harry nodded.

"So, Harry, would you like us to become your guardians?" Emma asked. "If you'd like, you can think about it for a few days. We have a tentative date for a hearing three days from now. If you want to do this, we'll go and make it all legal so you can go back to school with real guardians. If you don't want to do this, that's your choice and our feelings won't be hurt. In that case, we'll cancel the court hearing."

Harry took a small bite of his mashed tart as he thought. The offer was tempting. "Can I think about it? I think I can tell you tomorrow."

"Of course," Emma assured him. "It's a big decision and we understand. If you want this, we'll do our very best to support you and love you."

A nagging doubt ate at Harry and it took him a moment to figure it out. "Why?" he meekly asked. "Why would you do this for me?"

Emma smiled broadly. "That's very easy to answer, Harry. Dan has given you one reason already, one that's very important to him personally. Both of us feel you've had an unfair life and we want to make it better for you. Why you? Well, because I feel I've come to know you quite well thanks to Hermione's letters and meeting you for real has only reinforced that idea that you're a very nice person, Harry. You deserve to have a better life. And if all of that is not good enough for you," she watched him blush, "we're doing it because you're Hermione's best friend."

Harry shyly smiled and nodded. They seemed to like him because he was Harry, not because of some title he had. That caused him to think about what a great offer this was. If he was staying with some Wizarding family, he could never know if they loved him or loved his fame; but the Grangers did not care that he was The Boy-Who-Lived. They were not magical and had nothing to gain by it. They could never brag to their friends about The Boy-Who-Lived living with them. That thought made him feel a lot more comfortable about it all. There was one other concern though.

"Would I become a Granger or stay a Potter?"

Dan smiled. "It would be your choice, Harry. But if I may, from what I've read in Hermione's Wizarding history books, you might want to stay a Potter. I suspect you would want to continue your ancestral

line. That seems to be important there."

Harry nodded. "I think you're right." He started wondering about something else and looked at Hermione, who looked back at him quizzically.

"Was there something else, Harry?" Dan asked.

He mentally groaned. It had to be her father who asked. He gathered his Gryffindor courage. "I was just wondering, well ..." Harry looked from Hermione to her father. "I know we're only eleven, well she's twelve, but I guess I'm trying to say that I know we're both very young, but what if, someday, you know, we find we like each other, well, that way, and well, can we..." Harry dropped his head to the table, almost hitting his plate. Could he have rambled any more and phrased that any worse, he asked himself.

Harry heard a chuckle and looked up. Hermione was beet-red and looking down, but her mother was the one chuckling. Pulling up his courage, he sneaked a glance at her father and saw that he was smiling as well.

"Legally speaking," Dan replied far too jovially for Harry, "there would be no problem. On the topic of dating my daughter, we'll cross that bridge if we get there."

"Thank you," he said weakly as he looked back at Hermione as he could not seem to bring himself to really look at her father.

"Did you have any other questions, Harry?" Emma asked.

He shook his head. "No, other than I think I'd like to be excused. I'm getting tired from the travelling and the long day." It was a little after nine and it had been a very emotional day.

"Of course. The bathroom is at the end of the hall. Feel free to sleep

in tomorrow as it is Saturday," Emma told him.

"If you don't mind, Harry," Dan spoke up, "I have an errand to run tomorrow afternoon in regards to Christmas and I was wondering if you would come with me to give me some advice on what to buy."

"Err, sure, if I can." Maybe her father was not too upset with him if he wanted Harry's help on something.

"Excellent. Well then, have a pleasant evening."

"Thanks, Mr Granger." Harry turned to the other end of the table.
"Thank you for the dinner, Mrs Granger. It was very good."

"Thank you, Harry. You do have excellent manners. Pleasant dreams."

Harry rose and quickly walked upstairs. When he came out of the bathroom, Hermione was waiting for him and followed him into his room.

She stood right next to him and whispered. "Are you all right with all of this? I didn't know they were going to do that, but it must be so overwhelming."

He gave her a caring smile. "You have wonderful parents, Hermione. I'll be fine, but I do want to think about this. I think I'd be foolish to tell them no, but I also believe I need to think about this for more than a few seconds."

"That would be the right thing to do. Good night, Harry." She gave him a hug and left the room.

Harry changed into his pyjamas and crawled into a comfortable bed. Turning the lights out, he thought about the offer the Grangers had made. It was very generous. He wondered if there were any

downsides to accepting it. He fell asleep before he could think of any.

The next day, Harry was up around nine and came downstairs to a wonderful aroma. Mrs Granger had made a full breakfast and it was very good. She had also refused his help when he tried to clean up. It was a new experience for him.

He had been thinking hard all morning. The conversation over breakfast was light and he had spoken little; they had let him mostly eat and listen. Since he could come up with no reason to say "no", before everyone could go their own way after breakfast, Harry screwed up his courage and said, "Mr and Mrs Granger, I want you to be my guardians."

Hermione squealed and ran over to him, engulfing him in a hug. Emma reached him next followed shortly by Dan. Harry revelled in the feel of the group hug. He now had a real family who wanted him and he had trouble imaging anything better than that.

"We'll need to go over some papers later," Dan finally said, "but it can wait for now. Why don't you kids go play? Your mother and I will talk to our solicitor to make sure everything is taken care of."

"Thanks, Mr Granger!" Harry was extremely grateful.

The morning was spent with Hermione showing him around the house and then watching a movie. He had heard Dudley talk about "Star Wars", but he had never seen it. Hermione had picked it because she thought he would like it, and he did. It was more of a favourite of her father than it was one of hers.

After lunch, all four of them went into London. The girls had some shopping to do. Harry noticed a few thoughtful looks from Hermione and realized he had not gotten her anything for Christmas. While Emma took Hermione one way, Dan took him the other direction into a large department store, and then into the young women's

department.

"What do you think of this for Hermione?" Dan asked him.

Harry looked at the pink shirt. "Uh, I think she'd like it, except for the colour."

Dan looked thoughtful. "Yes, I believe you're right. I don't recall seeing any of her other clothes in this colour. Well, why don't you pick out a better colour for her then?"

"Err, OK," he said nervously. Despite his misgivings, it was not as hard as he thought and they had a present for Hermione in short order. As they continued to walk around, Harry used his courage to ask a question. "Mr Granger? Can we find something else for Hermione? I haven't had time to shop for her."

The look that briefly went over the man's face made Harry think the real reason for the trip was to inconspicuously give Harry a chance to shop, but he quickly dismissed the idea. That would be too Slytherin and he did not think of Hermione's parents that way. Nevertheless, the two males soon found themselves at the jewellery counter.

Harry looked around and eventually saw a number of necklaces with animals on them, including one with a lion. It was not a very Gryffindor lion, but still, he thought it suited her. "This one," he said and pointed.

Dan looked over his shoulder. "You have good taste, Harry."

"Thanks!" Harry beamed and then he thought of a problem and his face fell. He motioned for Dan to lean down. "Uh, I only have my other money."

The man chuckled. "Not a problem, Harry. Let me spot you this and you can repay me later. I believe Emma wanted to go to your

shopping area for a few things. I'll let you take care of that, if you like."

"Thanks, Mr Granger!" Harry was pleased. He was also getting along with his best friend's father far better than he had first imagined. Mr Granger had not bitten his head off once.

On their way out, taking the long way around the store because Dan wanted to look at a few other things, they ended up in the young men's department. Harry looked at some of the new clothes wistfully.

"Would you like some, Harry?" came Dan's quiet voice from behind him. "I'll spot you that too, if want." When Harry still said nothing, Dan asked, "They never bought you anything, did they?" Harry slowly shook his head. Dan put a hand on the boy's shoulder as he said, "Let's get you a couple of outfits. We have time for that."

"But..." Harry started to protest, although he was not sure why.

"Everyone deserves one or two nice things and you do need something a little nicer to wear when we go to court." Dan gently propelled him into the department. Fifteen minutes later, Harry had a new pair of jeans and a pair of trousers, as well as a couple of shirts. Dan even managed to convince him to get a new set of trainers, instead of wearing the ones that were barely holding together and were too big for him.

"Thanks for everything!" Harry said, wearing his new jeans, polo shirt, and trainers out of the store.

"No problem, Harry. It was no problem at all." Inside, Dan was almost consumed by his anger and it was only through great will power that he kept it in check. It had also been difficult not to get Harry a new coat and a complete new wardrobe. Back at the car, all the packages were put into the boot of the car and they waited for the girls, who showed up a few minutes later.

"Harry, you look great," Hermione told him as she walked around him, embarrassing him.

"You do look very nice, Harry dear," Emma said with a caring smile.

Harry looked at Hermione's father thankfully, really appreciating the help and how he had been so good about it all. It was almost like a dream and he hoped it continued.

A short drive later, Dan parked the car again and they all walked over to a place where Dan and Emma had trouble looking until they each put a hand on Hermione. She led her parents and her friend into the Leaky Cauldron, swiftly through the pub to avoid attention, and into the shopping area.

"Why are we here?" Harry finally asked, unable to contain his curiosity any more.

"The book store, why else?" Emma told him with a wry smile, one mimicked by her daughter.

He felt a hand lightly clap him on the shoulder. "Just get used to it, Harry," Dan advised him.

"Oh, I know. She spends most of her free time in the library at school."

Dan laughed. "I'm not the least bit surprised." Hermione playfully stuck her tongue out at her father and raised her nose into the air, which only generated more laughter.

In the bookstore, everyone seemed to go their own way, which Harry found interesting. Dan and Emma went to the reference section, but they seemed to be looking for different things. Harry found Hermione in the section that talked about bonds and oaths. He was surprised

that he had forgotten about her task to come here to look for more information.

"Find anything?" he quietly asked her.

"No," she said as she re-shelved a book. "Most of these are in the library at school. That other one was useless. I guess we've found something new."

Harry snorted. "Right. And of course, it had to happen to me."

"Harry," she gently admonished him while putting a caring hand on his shoulder. "We will figure this out, even if it takes several years. I suspect this isn't new; it's just not well documented. I'll keep searching and in the meantime, we'll both enjoy it. Didn't you tell me to enjoy life sometimes?" she asked with a teasing grin.

He bashfully nodded.

"Come on, let's go find my parents before my mother buys the whole bookstore."

Harry chuckled. "Isn't that your job?" he joked.

"Where do you think I got it from?" she teased back.

"I'm surprised, Hermione," her mother told her when they all met.

The girl shrugged. "I couldn't find what I was looking for and I do have a large library of free books at school."

Emma put nearly ten books on the counter. Harry pulled out his money bag and started putting golden coins on the counter. "Harry!" Emma tried to stop him.

Dan put his hand on her arm. "It's a deal we made. I bought him a

few things since he didn't have any regular money and this is how he wanted to repay me."

Emma did not look convinced, but she did stop arguing. Harry ended up paying seven Galleons and some change. The woman paled when she saw what Harry had done. "Harry, do you realize how much you just paid?"

"Yes, about seven and a half Galleons," he said without concern and wondering why she was making such a big deal out of it. He took the stack of books and started carrying it, since Emma did not like she was capable of that at the moment.

"Harry?" Hermione got his attention. "She's asking if you know how much that is in Muggle money."

"No. I know that a Galleon is worth more, but the clothes your father bought me were really expensive. I still probably owe him more for them. Besides," Harry shrugged, "I've got plenty in my vault."

"You have a vault?" Hermione was incredulous.

"Sure, my parents left it for me. It pays for school supplies and anything else I need," he explained. "Oh, since we're here, can we stop at the Owl Emporium? I need to get some treats for Hedwig."

Emma finally found her voice. "Hedwig. That's the name of the white owl that's been bringing us letters, isn't it?"

"Yes, she's a great listener. She put up with me loads when I needed someone to talk to last summer," he explained, leading them all into the store.

The two adults just looked at each other and shook their heads. As Harry was finding the owl treats, Emma looked at Dan with a familiar expression.

"I know that look," he said. "What's on your mind, dear?"

"If we're to be a part of all of this and we need to send a letter to Hermione or anyone else, wouldn't it be useful to have our own family owl?"

Dan smiled and gave her a one-armed hug. "You're brilliant as always."

They got Harry to help, and a few minutes later, a tawny owl hooted at them. That owl and supplies came home with them.

It was probably luck, but they managed to get to the car without anyone recognizing Harry. He was quite pleased to have a normal day out. The ride home was not so normal, though.

As they started the trip, Emma turned in her seat to look at 'her children' in the back. "Harry? Can I ask you a few questions? I'd like to get to know you a little better."

Harry shrugged. "Sure."

"I'm really not concerned about money, as Dan and I make plenty, but how did you pay for school this year? Did your relatives give you some or are you on a scholarship?"

"My relatives give me money?" he asked incredulously.

"Sorry," Emma said contritely. "I should have figured that out based on your other comments. So you're on a scholarship then?"

"Err, no. As I understand, my parents set up payment for me when I was born. I'm not sure if that comes out of my vault or if they just paid it all up front. I suppose I should find out."

"Yes, that would be a good idea," she agreed. "Harry, do you know what the Pound-to-Galleon conversion rate is?"

"No, ma'am."

"I see." Emma looked at her husband, who only shrugged as he drove. "Harry, this will sound forward and rude, but I really need to know. Did you get us any Christmas presents?"

"No, ma'am. I wanted to, but I was unable. I'm sorry." He felt like he had let them down.

"Harry, no! Please don't feel bad, that wasn't my intention." She sighed. "I just didn't know how else to ask or to tell you, but please don't get us anything. The books you just bought us are worth about twenty years of presents."

Harry was shocked.

"You had no idea how much you spent, did you?" she asked.

"No, but like I said earlier, the clothes Dan bought me were expensive," he told her, hoping that would explain it.

She looked at her daughter, who was watching the conversation with great interest, and for once, had nothing to add, which was amusing in its own way. "Dan, how much would you say you spent for Harry?"

"Maybe a hundred and fifty pounds, total. The shoes were the most expensive part," Dan replied.

"Harry, you spent over five times that much on the books. Do you see now why I'm asking?" He nodded. "I suppose I'm also trying to find out how we need to help you, and it sounds like money management is one area. You said you have a vault. Do you know how much is in there or any other investments you parents may have left you that

need to be taken care of?"

"No, ma'am. I know there is a pile of Galleons almost as tall as I am, but that's all I know," he explained.

Emma went wide-eyed and looked at Dan, who had the same shocked look. Looking back again, she noticed that Hermione was also quite shocked. "I believe we need to sit down and fully discuss this, but it can wait until this summer, if it's waited this long."

Emma was practically having a heart-attack based on she just heard. The young man was very wealthy; in fact, should he convert his gold into Pounds Sterling, based on the present conversion rate, he might be wealthier than they were. She had no idea how far his vault would take him in the Wizarding World though. She had a lot more to learn in order to help Hermione grow up in the magical world. They were fortunate that someone connected to the Wizarding School did know the conversion rates as children of non-magical parents were given steep discounts because they were not already in the Wizarding economy. If not for that, even they would not have been able to afford Hogwarts, and they were considered well-off in the non-magical world.

Shaking her head, she tried to go on. "All of that aside, could you please tell me how you've seen your school term, besides what you told us last night?"

"You mean like what's happened?" he asked.

"Yes, that would be lovely," she encouraged him, wondering what he would tell her that her daughter had left out. Hermione seemed to wonder too, as she was giving him some interesting looks that Emma could not quite decipher.

"Well, after I got to school, I've been learning a lot about various types of magic. You know, Charms, Transfiguration, stuff like that.

One of the highlights," Harry's expression became joyous, "was learning how to fly on a broom. I also made the Quidditch team, too. I'm the youngest player in a century, so they tell me."

Hermione rolled her eyes and lightly snorted.

"Hey, I don't give you a hard time about spending all of your free time in the library," he retorted.

"You do sometimes," she corrected him.

"Not often, though."

Emma found the scene funny. She would never have imagined her Hermione exhibiting such typical behaviour for her age. It was actually refreshing. "Then what?" she quickly interjected, wanting to stop any arguments from really getting going.

"Oh, well," he looked at Hermione, who was giving him a look as if trying to divine what he would say next. "Uh, Hermione and I had an argument about me being on the team, but we patched it up pretty quickly."

Emma raised an eyebrow at her daughter. This was something she had not heard about.

"Well, he was getting special treatment and breaking the rules," Hermione said to defend herself.

"Why didn't you tell your head of house, Professor McGonagall?" Emma asked.

Hermione gave her a 'get real' look before she said with some exasperation, "Mum, Professor McGonagall was the one leading the charge for Harry to play! She's the one who bought a broom for the 'team seeker' since first-years can't bring brooms."

"Many rules have exceptions," her father told her sagely.

"I know," Hermione said tiredly, "you've told me before; but it still seemed unfair."

"So how did you patch it up, Harry?" Emma asked, to get things back on track.

Harry looked down at his hands and became very quiet.

"Harry?" Emma wondered what she had stumbled onto. A glance to her right showed her husband to be concerned as well. Hermione looked almost as uncomfortable as Harry.

"I apologized as the argument became insignificant after he saved my life," said a very tiny voice from Hermione.

It took all of Emma's self-control not to shout 'What?!' at the top of her lungs. "Would you please explain that?" she said with forced control. Emma noticed Harry was still looking down as if deeply embarrassed.

"A boy in our class had been a real prat to me on Halloween," Hermione started to explain with reluctance in her voice. "I had been feeling badly about everything and was wondering if I really wanted to continue at Hogwarts, and well, his comments were the straw that broke the camel's back."

Emma nodded in understanding. Her daughter had been made fun of many times at school because of her more advanced view of life and learning. She had never had any real friends before, which was one of the reasons she and Dan were taking such an interest in Harry.

"I hid in a bathroom all afternoon and into the evening while I cried and, well, had a pity party."

"No one missed you? Didn't teachers notice you were missing?" her mother asked, alarmed.

"A few of us did," Harry said and suddenly looked up, "but we didn't know what to do."

Emma smiled at him. "Of course, Harry. I wouldn't expect an eleven year-old boy to know what to do for a crying girl."

He blushed and looked back down.

"But no teachers came looking for you?"

"No, Mum. They probably would have if I hadn't shown up by curfew, but well, that was never an issue because while I was in the bathroom, a troll somehow entered the castle and found me."

Based on the looks on the kid's faces, Emma knew she was missing something important. "Describe a troll, please." She had visions of an old fairy tale, and they never really sounded all that bad to her, more like an cantankerous deformed old man.

"About eight feet tall, skin harder than leather, and smells like a train station bathroom in the hot summer," Harry said. "They also usually carry really big clubs."

"But they're not very smart," Hermione quickly added, "so it's very easy to out-smart them."

"Sounds like some rugby players I know," Dan commented.

Emma did not even reprimand her husband; she was in shock at what her little girl had faced. "Is that sort of thing common at school?" she asked in a very quiet voice that took extreme control to even talk. Her emotions over this new school and world were about to get the

best of her.

"I asked some of the older students," Hermione said fairly calmly, "and they said this had never happened before that they knew of."

"But if you're talking about dangerous things, there is something special being hidden on the third floor. I mean, it has to be special since they have a three-headed Cerberus guarding it, and the Headmaster said a painful death was awaiting anyone who tried to get to it," Harry said.

"Harry," Hermione hissed. "You're not helping things right now."

"Huh?" Hermione nodded her head toward her mother. "Oh, sorry," he said contritely when he saw her pained expression.

"But don't worry, Mum. When Harry heard there was a troll loose that I wouldn't know about, he came to find me so I could join everyone else in the safety of our common room. And when he saw the troll had me cornered, he jumped on its back and used magic to knock it out. Once he had rescued me, he helped me back to our common room. We never got into any trouble either." Hermione sounded quite happy about the last part.

Emma looked out the car window and noticed they were close to home. She was thankful because she wanted a very stiff drink at the moment. That and perhaps a good cry.

Recognizing his wife's now silent state, Dan asked, "So that's how you two became such good friends?"

"Yes," Hermione answered. "It's hard to share something like that and not become good friends." She was glad they were able to avoid the whole bonding part of the story.

"Was there anything else? Dragons or maybe something else big

and dangerous?" Dan asked, really hoping he did not receive an affirmative on that.

"No, except for my problems with Snape, but you heard about that last night," Harry told him.

Dan pulled into the garage of their house a moment later. He handed the keys to his daughter. "Kitten, why don't you and Harry go on in the house? Your mother and I will bring the packages in."

"Sure, Dad." Hermione gave Harry a 'taking charge' look that Dan had no trouble understanding. She knew he needed to talk to her mother alone and made sure Harry knew he had to go into the house.

In the quiet of the garage, Dan looked at his wife, who still had a shocked look. "Honey, she's just fine. Harry was there to save her and they became good friends." Dan was not surprised to see his normally strong wife lean over and grab him, silently crying.

"We could have lost her," she hoarsely whispered. "We could have lost both of them. Why do we let them go there?"

Dan rubbed her back and held her. "Because that's where they want to be, and we have to let them grow up and find their own place in the world."

"But..." she started to protest, trailing off as words failed her.

"I know, honey, but in some ways it sounds a little like my army days. The situations were more dangerous than for the average person on the street, but we also had better ways of dealing with it than the average person. If my unit had been called to service and ordered to attack a place, we would have had big guns, explosives, and a lot of other dangerous weapons at our disposal. Our children don't have that, but they do have magic to help, and they are being trained to

use it."

Emma sniffled but nodded to show she understood what he was saying.

"Yeah, I'm not overly happy about it either, but there are no guarantees for the perfect life. Let's go in and relax for a bit. We can go out to that little Chinese place down the street that you like, so you don't have to fix dinner," he suggested lovingly. "We can talk about this again in a few days if you want." He hoped the initial emotional rush would be gone by that time and they could talk about it more logically.

"Thank you, dear," she told him and kissed him lightly on the cheek. They gathered the packages and took them in. Dan also handed her the tags he had taken off of Harry's new clothes. Emma smiled and gave him a hug. "Good job, I'll take it from here." The more normal activity was very welcome to her at the moment.

Harry was so happy he was almost skipping. Four months ago, he was required to stay at the Dursleys. Now, on the afternoon of the twenty-third of December of 1991, the papers in his hands said that he could always stay with the Grangers. They were his legal guardians.

"You're happy, aren't you, Harry," Hermione asked with a smile as she walked next to him out of the government building.

"Very," he answered with a big grin. "It was all so easy, too."

Dan chuckled. "Just remember, Harry, a good solicitor can make a lot of things easy. Not to mention that you had a lot of sympathy on your side."

Harry looked up at the man. "Mr Granger, that must have been expensive. Do I..."

"No," Dan cut him off. "You don't owe us a single penny, Harry. Despite what I may have implied a moment ago, this really did not cost all that much, and I was happy to pay it to get you out of that hell hole." He had had a private conversation with his daughter about what she knew about Harry living at the Dursleys. From what little she had shared, he was incensed that could have happened. In the end, he was not sure if he was angrier at the Dursleys for what they did, or at Dumbledore for putting Harry there without finding out what they were like.

"So, Harry, since this is your big day," Dan told him, "how about we celebrate with a nice steak dinner?"

"Daaad! Why do we always have to go out for steak when we celebrate?"

Dan gave his girl a caring look after her protest. "You don't have to eat one if you don't want to, Kitten, but this is Harry's day and a good steak is an excellent way for a young man to celebrate."

Harry looked at the other three and saw support and love -- for him. It was like being hit with a new sense of purpose and gave him a new outlook -- life could be good. With a goofy grin, he said, "Sure, Mr Granger." He paused for a moment. "Or would you prefer ... Dad," he looked to Emma and added, "and Mum?"

Dan was so happy he thought he would burst. Emma looked to be feeling the same. "I think we'll make it your choice, Harry. Dan and Emma might be better in the long run, starting in a few years, but if you want to call us Dad and Mum for a while, you may."

"I'll think about it," Harry said with a smile. He looked over at Hermione. With a shy smile, he whispered, "But never 'Sis'."

Hermione blushed as she beamed. Dan and Emma looked at one another and wondered what Harry had said to their little girl.

In Little Whinging, Surrey, some magical runes started to slowly decay and fade.

In the hills of Scotland, a little silver instrument with a spinning disk started to gradually slow its movement.

No one noticed either event.

Christmas had been wonderful for Harry. It was his first Christmas to get presents. Dan and Emma had given him a large box of clothes, some his current size and some bigger for later. Hermione had given Harry a helmet for playing Quidditch and the book Quidditch Through the Ages. Harry was pleased that Hermione had liked her necklace with the lion on it. Emma had said she thought it was a good gift for their 'Kitten', making Hermione blush even more. The rest of the day was spent relaxing and playing board games as a family.

Activity started to return to normal on Boxing Day, even though Dan and Emma had the day off. Now that Harry had a legal guardian that actually cared about him, they started talking about Snape and his behaviour. Hermione had secured several copies of the official complaint form, which they started filling out from her detailed notes. Emma took McGonagall's staff policy book to the office and made several copies using the photocopier. Besides the complaint forms, Harry received one other result: an unwelcome surprise.

"Hermione," her mother called to her as she came back from her office, "please go get the informational materials Professor McGonagall brought to you when she informed us you were a witch."

"Sure, Mum," Hermione hurried out of the room.

Harry looked at his new mum. "Informational materials?"

"Yes," Emma said absently as she read her copy of the teacher's manual, making a note in the margin. "When the Professor came over, she brought several brochures and a couple of books. The brochures contained the usual propaganda extolling the school's virtues, and some financial information." She highlighted another section, not taking notice of Harry's expression yet. "The books were the student policy manual and an introduction to the Wizarding World." She put a star by a paragraph before she realized he had stopped responding. She looked over at him and saw his shocked look. "What's wrong, Harry?"

Hermione hurried back into the room. "Here you go, Mum." Then she too noticed her friend's look. "Harry! What's wrong?!"

"I, I... I didn't get any of that." He felt like he had been kicked in the gut. Yet another way his early life had been unfair.

"You didn't get what, Harry?" Hermione asked as she came over and grabbed his hand in concern.

Emma came over and spread the materials Hermione had just handed her on the table in front of Harry. "You didn't get any of this?"

Harry numbly shook his head.

Hermione exhaled loudly in disgust. "No wonder you seemed lost at the beginning of the year -- you were! That is so unfair." Harry nodded.

"Harry, can you please tell me how you found out about the Wizarding World?" Emma asked him gently as she took a seat next to him.

"I, I didn't know anything about it until my eleventh birthday..." Harry went on to explain about the letters, his relatives trying to hide from the letters, Hagrid finding him and taking him to Diagon Alley, as well as his trip to King's Cross and having to hunt for the portal to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$."

Hermione gave him a hug to comfort him and Emma laid a gentle hand on his arm.

"Harry, you can read my copies," Hermione offered. "And when we get back to school, we can ask Professor McGonagall for a set for you."

"Thanks," he told her weakly, grateful for their support, wondering what else he was missing.

That crisis solved, the trio resumed researching information about the school policies and documenting Snape's bad behaviour. A little while later, Dan joined them, carrying a book they had bought last week that listed and described major magical schools around the world.

"There is a nice school in Ireland called 'Scoil ar Draiocht Glas' and another one in France called 'Beauxbatons'," Dan told him as he flipped between them in the book in his hand.

"Dad? Why would Harry and I change schools?" Hermione asked very seriously.

He set the book down and looked at each of them just as seriously. "I'm not suggesting that you switch this moment, but you know that your mum and I believe in having options and knowing what they are."

She nodded and quoted, "Proper planning and being prepared can make mountains into mole hills."

Dan grinned at his saying being repeated back. "Right you are; I'm glad you've listened to me. Anyway, your mum and I are concerned about some of the things that have happened at Hogwarts and we believe it best to know what other schools there are so that if things get worse you can transfer next year. We really should have done this research last summer, but Professor McGonagall showed up fairly late in the summer and we did not have time." He paused and looked at his wife. "Do you suppose the timing was to prevent families like us from doing this sort of research?"

Emma shook her head and said with a grin, "I don't believe so, although I could see how that would appeal to your love of conspiracy theories."

He smiled back. "Remember, you're not paranoid if they really are out to get you."

Emma and Hermione joined Dan in chuckling. Harry lightly chuckled too, although he did not understand the joke.

All-in-all, Harry had a wonderful Yule holiday.

((A/N: The name of the Irish school "Scoil ar Draiocht Glas" comes from "Harry Potter and the Irish Choice" written by "DisobedienceWriter". If you haven't read the story, go read it. It's worth your time.

Yes, I know the names of Hermione's parents are not given in the books, so I used what is common in many fanfic stories. Yes, I understand the inside joke there, but I've seen those names used so much, they seem "normal" to me.

I'm quite sure that if there was a custody battle over Harry in real life, that it would be quite messy. However, we all know that the Dursleys don't want Harry, so that will never happen. :-)

I'm aware that in an interview JKR said that 1 Galleon was worth about 5 GBP. However, for the purposes of this story, I've used the logic of a London newspaper in the mid-1990's cost 20p while Hermione paid 1 Knut for a Daily Prophet. Equating those 2 amounts and using the proper multipliers results in 1 G equalling 98.60 GBP, or to make things convenient for me: 1 G equals 100 GBP. As a secondary defence for this logic, I'll point out that JKR has also mentioned that she's bad with math. Hmm, maybe she could lose some of her billion Euros in my direction. :-))

Chapter 3 - Corrections

Traffic had been a little heavier than anticipated, so Harry and Hermione arrived at King's Cross with only fifteen minutes to spare. They quickly exchanged hugs and said good-bye to Hermione's parents and went through the portal to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. To their surprise, there was a family waiting for them who approached them before they could get on the train.

"Hermione?" Ron Weasley called out.

The two stopped and waited. The Weasleys, led by Ron, joined them. Behind him stood a somewhat intimidating looking woman with red hair looking at her son, a jovial looking man with thinning red hair looking at the two of them, and red-haired girl that looked about a year younger than them standing next to her mother looking very intently at both of them, but mostly at Harry.

"Yes, Ron?" Hermione answered him; she was a few steps short of where Ron stood, with Harry standing next to her on her left. She wondered what he wanted. Ron looked nervous, now that she really looked at him.

"I, uh ... I took what you said to heart and tried it ..." he trailed off and glanced back at his mother.

She could not fathom what he was talking about. "Excuse me?"

Ron licked his lips. "I, err, I talked to my parents about what happened at school, and well, they helped me to understand what I had done." He paused and looked at Hermione with a hopeful look, but when she said nothing, he looked back to his mother who nodded to him and then to her.

Hermione was finally figuring out that his mother was making him say something to her, and it was amusing to watch him struggle.

"Right. I'm trying to say that I'm sorry for being a prat to you. I really didn't understand how the things I said could sound to someone else, and I'm sorry. Could we be friends again?" Ron still looked nervous and there appeared to be a thin sheen of sweat on his forehead.

Harry was impressed that Ron had said that, as he would not have thought him capable based on his past actions. Perhaps there was hope for him yet. Then again, it also looked like he would not be doing this if not for his mother. Harry decided to wait and see how Ron acted in the future.

It was all so obvious now, Hermione thought. Ron had been asked how last term went, and she suspected one of his brothers had mentioned Ron had gotten into a flaming row with her and had overheard her tell Ron to talk to his parents about what he had done wrong, and said brother had brought this up in front of his parents. She suspected the twins of doing that, as it would fit their personality and they were friends with Harry because of Quidditch. Ron had probably been raked over the coals and then forced to apologize, hence the scowling woman behind him. She sighed, as she would have rather he figured it out on his own and then come to her. That would have been more meaningful, but she supposed that she would have to take what she could get. However, that did not mean she could not extract a little interest from the debt he had accumulated.

"Do you plan to call me names in the future?" she asked innocently.

Ron energetically shook his head and reminded her so much of the house-elves she had seen in the school kitchen that she almost giggled.

"Very well then, I accept your apology and we can be friends," she said.

Ron looked relieved, but he still was somewhat tense as he turned to

Harry. "Harry?"

"I accept as long as you don't hurt Hermione again," Harry said very evenly.

Hermione noticed that the little girl at been looking at Harry carefully the whole time, but had frowned briefly when he had mentioned her name. She wondered why and tried to remember to ask Ron later.

"Thanks, mate," Ron said with great relief and turned back to his father, who gave him a nod and a smile, and then his mother lost her scowl and became a lot more pleasant looking.

"How about introducing us, Ron?" his mother asked.

"Oh, right. This is my father, my mother, and my little sister Ginny. Everyone, this is Harry Potter and Hermione Granger, they're first-year Gryffindors with me," Ron introduced them all.

"Hello, Harry, Hermione," Mrs Weasley said hurriedly. "It's very nice to meet you."

"Thank you, it's very nice to meet you too," Hermione returned, and Harry echoed her.

The train whistle blew, preventing more talk. When it quieted down, Hermione said, "If you'll excuse us, we need to get on the train so we don't get left behind."

"Of course, dears, run along; Ron will join you in a moment," Mrs Weasley instructed them.

Harry and Hermione hurried to the train and boarded. They found a compartment with Neville in it and joined him. Ron joined them a moment later, just before the train pulled away.

As Ron finished getting settled, Hermione looked through the door window and saw two people she had been watching for. She nudged Harry. "That was Justin and Hannah walking by."

He grinned at her and said, "Thanks," as he rose.

"Where are you going, Harry?" Ron asked.

"I need to talk to a couple of people. I'll be back in a few minutes." He quickly slid out the door before more questions could be asked.

"Ron, why did your sister seem to be so interested in us?" Hermione asked.

He shrugged. "I think she's just bored at home and wants to know about Hogwarts, but who knows. She'll come to school next year."

Hermione nodded and filed that away. "So Neville, how was your holiday?" she asked. She hoped this would be a good chance to get to know the boy better. She had enjoyed talking to him on the train a few weeks ago.

As they progressed through dinner, Hermione began to wonder when she should give her Head of House the things she had for her. Would after dinner be appropriate? Or would first thing in the morning be better? Her dilemma was partially solved as dinner ended.

Professor McGonagall walked over to them, or rather Harry, but Hermione was standing next to him.

"Mr Potter. Will you come with me please? You're not in trouble, but the Headmaster would like to ask you a few questions."

"May I ask what about?" Harry held steady on the outside, but he

was really wondering what this was about, considering everything that had happened over the holidays.

"I believe it has something to do with your family, but I'm not entirely sure," McGonagall replied.

Harry nervously looked at Hermione, who took that as her cue to help.

"Professor? I think it would be best if I came too."

Her teacher turned to her. "I'm sorry, Miss Granger, but the questions are in regards to Mr Potter's family, not yours."

"I'm sorry to contradict you, Professor, but I really should be a part of that discussion based upon recent happenings. I also have your book and some forms for you, which the Headmaster will want to see as well." Hermione hoped she would not have to fully explain things here, as there were several people still around them, all listening in.

McGonagall glanced back and forth between the two students, wondering what was going on between them. It was obvious there was more than initially met the eye. "Very well, if both of you will follow me please."

When they were in the corridor and it was only Professor McGonagall in front of them, Hermione reached over and grabbed Harry's hand, giving it a squeeze and him a smile.

Harry was heartened by the gesture and stood a little taller, smiling back. He squeezed her hand back before letting go. Hermione would stand by him and they would get through this together.

"What did Justin and Hannah say?" Hermione asked in a whisper as they walked.

"They had the same experience that you did," Harry whispered back.

Hermione nodded and frowned slightly. This was yet another anomaly surrounding Harry.

When they walked into the Headmaster's office, they saw the old man raise one bushy white eyebrow and look at his Deputy.

"When I mentioned why I thought you wanted to talk to Mr Potter, Miss Granger said that she had some information and should be present too," McGonagall explained as she took a seat.

Hermione and Harry shared a large chair, neither looking uncomfortable in doing so.

The Headmaster looked at both of them for a moment and a quick surface scan using Legilimency showed a little curiosity as well as more self-confidence from Harry than he had expected. That he was unable to easily get a deeper reading perplexed him slightly. He cleared his throat. "Very well then. At the beginning of each term, there are a number of things I check to make sure all is ready. One of them is a monitor I have on the protections on your home, Harry." He watched the boy react with confusion, while the girl looked like something had been confirmed.

"This morning," Dumbledore continued, "I discovered that the protections on your home, Harry, are all but non-existent. In fact, it would be a good idea to send you there for a week or two to recharge them, except that you just came from there. That leads me to ask if anything unusual happened over the holidays that I need to know about. It is very important that those protections remain, so I ask if there is anything you need to tell me?"

Harry was confused, but the Headmaster had raised a few questions in his mind. "I'm sorry, sir, but what protections and why would I need them?"

Dumbledore really did not want to have to explain this, but in the long run, it would probably be better to do it now. "The day I placed you at your aunt's home, I put some protective wards in place that are charged by your magic. They protect you from harm, and that was very important as some of Voldemort's followers were still at large and attacking people. So you see, you need a safe place that you can stay when you are not at Hogwarts where I can help protect you."

"I see." Harry looked at Hermione.

Hermione nodded and then reached into the pockets in her robes. "I can help explain, Headmaster," she said. First she handed a slim book to her Head of House. "Professor, here's your book back. Thank you for loaning it to me. My mother made a copy so she can reference it in the future."

"That shouldn't be possible," McGonagall exclaimed, very surprised. "There are anti-copying charms on the book to prevent Duplication charms from working." Her eyes narrowed slightly. "And you should not be using magic outside of school anyway."

"Oh, that's easily explained," Hermione said with a knowing look. "My mother took the book to her office and put it on the photocopier. It took her about fifteen minutes to make several copies."

Some of that explanation had gone right past McGonagall. "Photo...copier?" she asked.

"Yes. It's a machine that you can put paper or books on. The machine takes a picture of it and then prints it on paper so you have an exact copy," Hermione explained. "She gave me a copy of it, in addition to a couple more she kept for herself."

McGonagall turned the book over in her hand, looking at it as if she did not trust it anymore.

Dumbledore was thinking furiously. He could not quite figure out where the Granger girl was going with this, but he had a bad feeling about it. "What book is that, Minerva?"

"It's our teacher's handbook," she answered, still scowling at it, as if it had betrayed her.

"Miss Granger, as fascinating as that explanation was, what does that have to do with the protective wards at Harry's house failing?" Dumbledore watched her carefully.

"I also have these for you, Professor." Hermione handed a sheaf of parchment and paper to her Head of House before she looked at the Headmaster. "Nothing directly, Headmaster, but by seeing what rules the teachers have to follow, it allowed my mother to fill out those forms for Harry and me."

Dumbledore looked to Minerva, who was reading the top page. When she looked up, she handed the form to him before looking at the next one. She quickly noticed that the next form was attached to some other pages, but they were not parchment.

"Miss Granger, why is this ... paper ... attached to the form?"

"Oh, well, you only gave me three forms, but we needed more. So my mother used the official form that was on parchment as the first page and then printed the rest of the complaints out on paper. See at the top left corner? They're stapled together," Hermione pointed out quite calmly.

Sure enough, McGonagall lifted the top page and the rest were attached at the corner. Skimming, she saw numerous incidents cited, each by date and offence, followed by a description, just like the one she had handed to Dumbledore.

"Miss Granger," Dumbledore looked at the girl, "why would you waste our time with complaints about Professor's Snape comments in class? I don't think four examples of 'improper behaviour by a teacher' are worth this effort. If I have to deal with this officially, I have to have an investigation, a response, then the result is sent to the board of governors to be repeated."

"Each of them by themselves is probably not worth it, Headmaster. If only one of them had happened, we would not have bothered. But we documented this to show that the problem is epidemic. It does not happen just to me, or to only Harry, but to both of us. If needed, I could get other students to fill out complaints too to show how widespread the problem with Professor Snape is."

"Mr Potter too?" He looked to his deputy. "Minerva?"

"If I'm counting correctly," McGonagall shuffled through the paperwork, "there are fourteen counts of 'improper behaviour by a teacher', five counts of 'endangering a student', and twenty-four counts of 'incorrect punishment'." She looked at her student with incredulousness. "Is this all really true, Mr Potter?"

"Yes, Professor. There were a few more, but we had trouble remembering when they happened so we didn't list them."

"Why didn't you come to me at the time?" McGonagall asked, feeling shocked all these infractions had happened without her knowledge.

Harry looked down until Hermione nudged him. Then he sat up straighter and looked at his Head of House. "We didn't know everything he was doing was wrong, and well, while I didn't like it, it was a lot like my uncle treated me so I was kind of used to it. Also, the one time we did, you said you couldn't do anything about it because I was unable to file an official complaint."

McGonagall briefly closed her eyes and sighed.

"May I see that please?" Dumbledore asked.

Minerva opened her eyes and handed it over before she started looking at the third set of complaints. Her eyes went wide as she read the form. There were three incidents cited, and all were against... "Albus! These are against you." She thrust it to him.

Dumbledore grabbed it, wondering how bad this was going to be. He was also wondering why this was happening now. He read the form. "Failure to provide proper school materials?"

"Yes, sir," Harry answered. "You gave all Muggle-born students materials explaining Hogwarts and an introductory book about the Wizarding World to help them understand what they were getting into. The person you sent to me did not bring those materials which put me at a disadvantage."

"But you're not Muggle-born, Harry," Dumbledore objected.

"Headmaster, as your teacher's manual clearly states, all students raised with Muggles are to receive the introductory materials. As Mrs Granger pointed out, it was written with someone like me in mind, too," Harry told him.

Dumbledore looked at the bottom of the form and smiled. Quickly checking the other form, he saw that it was signed by her as well. "This is very interesting, Harry, but it can't be an official complaint form because your guardian didn't sign it." He was safe from having to do anything about all of this. There was only the Granger girl's form to contend with.

"But she is my legal guardian. The judge said so over the holidays," Harry objected.

A ball of fear formed in the pit of Albus's stomach. "Why would you

say that, Harry? Your aunt is your legal guardian."

"No, sir, she's not nor has she ever been, legally. The Dursleys have never been my legal guardians because they never submitted the proper legal forms. That was one of the things the Grangers showed me before they offered me the choice of making them my guardians. They're really nice so I choose them and they made it legal. I have a paper signed by a judge and everything." Harry beamed and Hermione joined him.

"So you didn't go home to the Dursleys for the Yule holidays?" Dumbledore asked.

"No, sir. Hermione invited me to her house. It was the best holiday I've ever had. I even got presents and got to eat Christmas dinner, both for the first time." Harry was still smiling.

"Mr Potter." His Head of House hoped she had heard incorrectly. "You've never had presents or Christmas dinner before?"

"No, Professor. I've had to cook it every year since I was eight, but I've never eaten it. No presents either," he told her honestly.

McGonagall felt her heart break a little, and she was sure it would be worse if she knew the rest of the story; furthermore, she was sure there was even more he was not telling. "Albus," she said sternly. "What did I tell you all those years ago? They were the worst sort of Muggles and you left him there anyway."

"It was for the best." Albus looked at Harry and quickly continued to try to gather information before Minerva could keep going. "Harry, it is extremely important that you return to the Dursleys. It is your home and the only place that can keep you completely safe."

"But it's not my home any longer," Harry objected, "so why would I want to go there?"

"Headmaster," Hermione spoke up, "you're incorrect in your statement because whatever protections you placed there did not keep Harry safe."

Dumbledore did not want to have to deal with the smart young witch, but he did not have a choice at the moment. "They have indeed kept Harry safe. Neither Death Eaters nor Voldemort have been able to reach him there."

"But they did not keep him safe from the Dursleys," Hermione persisted.

"They are his family, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said as if that should explain everything.

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "And how should family act?" Before an answer could be given, she asked, "Headmaster, what is the worst a family could do to a member without throwing them out of the house?"

"Miss Granger..."

"Please, Headmaster, it is very important that you answer that question," Hermione persisted.

Dumbledore sighed. "Very well. I suppose the worst would be not taking care of the person, letting the person hurt himself, and letting others hurt the person."

"If you'll also add hurt the person themselves, then the Dursleys did all of that to Harry and worse. They are not fit to be parents or to be around Harry," Hermione declared.

Dumbledore sighed and wondered. Was it all as bad as she really said? He could tell that she did believe everything she had said. He

looked back down at the form in his hand, since it appeared he would have to defend against it. "Two counts of 'endangering a student'?" he asked very surprised. "When I have endangered a student at the school?"

While the question was directed at Harry, Hermione answered. "The most obvious is the endangerment to the entire school population. You said that a most painful death awaited those who ventured onto the third floor. Since no classes go there, that has nothing to do with our education and you're doing something non-school related that puts students at danger by having it here."

"As long as everyone stays away, there is not an issue, Miss Granger," Dumbledore stated as if it should have been obvious.

Harry chuckled and everyone looked to him. "Headmaster, the best way to get us students to do something is to tell us not to. I'm aware of more than eight students who can tell you about the Cerberus behind the locked door."

McGonagall paled. "Are you serious, Mr Potter?"

"Yes, Professor. It's a common conversation in the common rooms, or at least in the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw houses. I don't care too much as I know I'm only a first year and can't get past it, but some of the older students are researching it ... and not just Gryffindors either," he hastily added.

McGonagall glared at Albus. "I told you that was a bad idea. You need to send it back to Flamel."

Harry puzzled over that. He had heard that name recently, then it came to him. "You mean Nicholas Flamel? The man you worked with on the uses of dragon's blood, Professor?"

"This is a topic that you need not concern yourself, Harry."

Dumbledore sounded the slightest bit irritated for the first time.

Harry was ready to drop it, but he could tell that Hermione was not, as she looked very thoughtful.

Dumbledore looked back down at the form. "What was the other problem?" He kept skimming the details. "A troll?" He was confused over this one.

"Yes, Headmaster," Hermione answered. "On Halloween night, you allowed a troll to enter the castle that almost killed me. I have asked the older students, and no one is aware of trolls happening by and entering the castle before. It is also not listed in *Hogwarts: A History*, making its occurrence to be very uncommon."

"Yes, well," Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Not everything that happens is listed in that book, Miss Granger. Nevertheless, I can't control the fact that a troll walks out of the Forbidden Forest and walks into the castle."

"Then what good is magic?" Harry asked. "Aren't you supposed to keep us safe here? I've been told that Hogwarts is the safest place in England, but it doesn't seem that way to me."

"It is quite safe, Harry. That was a very rare occurrence," Dumbledore did his best to figuratively wave the problem away.

"Miss Granger," McGonagall spoke up, as if just figuring something out. "Were you responsible for the demise of the troll?"

"No, Professor. I was trapped in there when I didn't know the troll was in the castle. Harry knew I was there and saved me from it."

The teacher's head jerked to the other student. "You managed to kill a troll by yourself, Mr Potter?"

"Kill it?" Harry was shocked. "No, I just knocked it out. We didn't stay around to wait for it to come after us again."

"I see," McGonagall said, not having the heart to tell him that he really had killed it. She looked over and saw that Dumbledore was slowly shaking his head. "Well, this has been an interesting conversation and it is near curfew. Please hurry back to the Tower. We shall have to go through all of this carefully. I suspect you will not hear from us about it until next week."

"Thank you, Professor," Hermione said as she stood. Harry nodded and followed her out of the office.

After the two students had left the office, Minerva turned to her superior. "Well, Albus, I'm afraid I have to agree with Mr and Mrs Granger. While I would not have looked at much of this the same way they have, I find their claims hard to refute given the evidence they have listed. What do you have to say for yourself?"

So many plans were in the midst of being dashed, Albus thought. Was it possible to recover any of them? At least one was still on track. Harry was not with a Wizarding family, so arrogance from his fame should still not be an issue. The Grangers ruined several other plans, the most important being that he needed Harry to look up to him as a trustworthy authority figure, much like a pseudo-grandfather, so Harry would take guidance from him. He mentally cursed the Dursleys for what they had done to Harry. Family just did not severely mistreat other members of the family. He had not expected that. Being firm was expected, mistreatment was not. It looked like he would not get Harry to return to the Dursleys, but maybe...

"Well, Albus?" Minerva asked again, interrupting his thoughts.

"I must go speak with the Grangers. Perhaps I can convince them to drop all or at least most of this for the greater good." Yes, he would appeal to their conscience. He stood, energized to meet the new

challenge. "Minerva, if you would, please find Severus and have him join you here in an hour. I must talk with him about these allegations and convince him to approach teaching with a gentler hand."

"Albus, five of the most serious charges against him would require you to dismiss him if the proper policies were to be followed. Even if he survives that, the sheer number of other charges against him might force him to be dismissed anyway. You might be better off cutting your losses and start searching for another Potions professor," she advised him.

He frowned for a moment and then looked at her, trying to make her understand. "I've always maintained that Voldemort did not fully die the night he went after the Potters. One day he will return and then we will need Severus to be our spy again. He must be here so he can maintain his charade of spying against me while he spies on Voldemort for us."

"Then you leave yourself no choice but to turn him into a model teacher," she said doubtfully, then not quite under her breath, "an impossible task if I've ever heard one."

"There are always alternatives," he countered. "You are in charge of the school until I return in an hour. Please give Severus my message." He turned to his fireplace and used the Floo to travel to his ancestral home. From there, he Apparated to the front porch a house on the outskirts of London.

Albus looked around and saw a nice neighbourhood. The houses were older but very nicely maintained. They were also all two stories tall and appeared stately. He knocked on the door and waited. The front light turned on and a man answered the door.

"Would this be the home of the Granger family?"

"Yes. Based on your appearance, you must be Albus Dumbledore."

He smiled at being known. Fame did have its uses. "Yes, I am. May I come inside to speak with you and your wife?"

"Very well." The man opened the door all the way and then closed it after Dumbledore was in. He led him to a living room where a woman was waiting. "My name is Dan Granger and this is my wife Emma."

Dumbledore gave a brief bow. "Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts at your service. I realize it is later than I would normally call upon the family of students, but a most urgent matter has come to my attention."

"Then have a seat, Mr Dumbledore," Dan waved him to a leather wing-backed chair before taking the nearby couch with his wife.

"Thank you. Your daughter handed me a stack of forms this evening after dinner and I wish to discuss them with you."

"Oh?" Emma asked, surprised. "What was unclear? We took great pains to document everything fully."

"Yes, well," Dumbledore smiled his best, trying to win them over. "The complaints that you have raised against Professor Snape seem most extreme."

"Actually, I thought we were giving him the benefit of the doubt in various incidents. We could have filed more," Emma coolly informed him.

They were not backing down. "I came to ask what it would take for you to withdraw them. I need to have Professor Snape at the school."

"Hermione said that he was the head of one of your student houses, but what else does the professor do besides that and teach Potions?" Emma asked him, looking very interested.

They were too well informed, Albus thought. It would be harder to get things past them. "I'm not at liberty to say, but I can say that it is very important to everyone that he remains at his post."

"These other good reasons have nothing to do with the school, do they?" Dan asked.

"I really am not at liberty to discuss them," Dumbledore repeated, hoping they would take his word for it.

"I'll take that as a 'no'," Dan said with a smile. "Headmaster, if I may so blunt, I believe you've fallen into a classic trap that ensnares many leaders. You've forgotten what your goals and priorities are. When I am treating a patient, all of my other obligations must be set aside. We both volunteer for charity work, we belong to professional organizations, we attend social gatherings, and we are parents as well as many other things. All of those do not matter when I am working with a patient. When you are on duty as a Headmaster, none of your personal pursuits should matter. If being Chief Wizard or Supreme Mugwump get in the way of being Headmaster, then you should either give those up or else stop being Headmaster so you can do those other things."

"Mr Granger, my activities are none of your concern," Dumbledore argued. Before he could continue, Mrs Granger spoke up.

"On the contrary, Headmaster, my husband's point is extremely apropos. As a Headmaster, you have two solemn duties as all headmasters do, especially since our children live at the school." She held up a hand and counted them off. "First, you must keep our children safe and that includes making the environment as safe as possible. Accidents will happen. Children will scrape their little hands and knees from time to time. But there is no place for leaving doors open so trolls can wander in, bringing in dangerous items with deadly guards, nor for teachers who do not teach them properly and safely."

"Mrs Granger..."

"Second," she overrode Dumbledore with her raised voice and a glare. "Headmasters are to provide the best possible environment for learning. That means the best teachers you can find along with the best educational material. Teachers who do not have the proper training and social skills, not to mention those who appear to have personal vendettas, should not be around children. That includes ghosts who only talk about one thing making the book a better teacher than the professor. It matters not whether the school is normal or magical, those two principles should apply." Emma was not sure how she had stayed calm through all of that, perhaps it was the slightly detached feeling she had at the moment, courtesy of the glass of wine just before their unexpected visitor had arrived.

"Mrs Granger, I assure you that I do care for every child there and I desire for Hogwarts to be the best magical school in all of Europe," Dumbledore stated.

"Then how do you explain trolls wandering around in the corridors, deadly animals inside guarding things that probably should be in a bank or security vault, teachers who abuse students, and who knows what else we've yet to discover?" Dan asked, wanting very much to get an honest answer, yet knowing he would not.

"Those are merely accidents or misunderstandings," Dumbledore explained, doing his best not to sweat. "As for Professor Snape, I really do need to have him at the school. Potion Masters are very few and we are lucky to have him. The upper years of learning especially need a man of his skill. What do I need to do for you to drop the complaints so he can stay?"

Emma chuckled lightly before she said, "If you'll sack him, I'll be happy to drop the complaints. That man should not be around children in general and Harry in particular. From what I've heard, I

would think Neville's grandmother should be having this same conversation with you."

Dumbledore did his best not to pale at the thought of having a conversation like this with Augusta Longbottom, but she had reminded him of an idea. "What if I convinced Professor Snape to become a model teacher?"

Dan and Emma both gaped, before Dan laughed. "It sounds to me as if you're asking a leopard to change his spots. I can't see how that would be possible, even with magic. I've met too many people like this Snape and none of them have ever been able to truly change."

"It will be a difficult thing," Dumbledore admitted. "What if I also found someone else to teach the lower years, where his mastery was not as necessary? That would allow Professor Snape to have less involvement with your children."

The parents looked at each other for a moment. "IF, and I am speaking hypothetically," Emma paused and let Dumbledore acknowledge her before she went on. "If you did that, what would happen a few years from now when Harry and Hermione reach the upper year classes?"

The Headmaster swallowed and thought carefully to word his response just right. "I would like to hope that after a few years of good behaviour on Professor Snape's part, you would be willing to let your children study with him. If not, then other arrangements could be made. Perhaps the other professor could teach your children's year."

"That would simplify things," Dan admitted before he looked at his wife. "Of course, I was looking forward to going to Ireland to check out the school there."

"And I was looking forward to visiting the one in France. Southern France is always so nice in the spring," Emma said, looking at her

husband.

Dumbledore did pale at hearing that. He needed to keep Harry at Hogwarts in order to train him later so Harry could successfully fulfil his destiny. He also feared what could happen if Harry left the country. Would he ever come back? Would England die at Voldemort's hands one day? Would "the Power" corrupt Harry and lead him to the Dark Arts? Since his other tactics seems to be failing, he decided to appeal to their family values. "If you would give me a little time, I'm sure I can get Professor Snape to change and I can work something out for the rest of the problems. Would you consent to delay the proceedings so that I may fix things?"

The Granger looked at one another for a long moment. Dan tilted his head slightly, almost in a shrug. "I would strongly prefer Professor Snape be sacked, but perhaps..."

Emma nodded. "On a few conditions, Headmaster."

Dumbledore almost breathed a sigh of relief while he kept the smile plastered on his face. "If they are within my power, madam."

"Assuming Professor Snape turns into a model teacher so he stops harassing students and that you find someone else to teach Harry and Hermione's year, I will agree to a thirty day delay to give you time to make corrections -- if you will have another member of the staff, for example Professor McGonagall, review every punishment Professor Snape hands out for the rest of the year. She is to monitor for correctness and even-handedness. Surely punishments have to be recorded?"

Dumbledore nodded. "There is a book that magically records all punishments and rewards. I would agree to that condition."

"Very good," Emma said. "Secondly, if either of my children are hurt enough to be in the hospital wing or are involved in an accident, you

are to notify us at the earliest opportunity."

"Of course, I can owl you if that happens," Dumbledore agreed. "However, you must understand that you will be unable to come to the school. The protections on the school do not allow non-magical people, such as yourselves, to visit."

"We do know of that limitation," Dan said, "but we desire to know of accidents as there may be alternatives to us visiting, such as having them brought to us."

"Madam Pomfrey, our school nurse, is second to none," Dumbledore said proudly. "She has received all the training necessary to be a fully-fledged healer; she has merely not taken the final exam."

"I understand, and you may be right that the best course of treatment would be for them to stay there. Nevertheless, we wish to be notified so we may discuss options," Dan stated firmly.

"That will not be a problem." Dumbledore hoped that was all.

"Professor Snape will have no interaction with our children. If he will not be sacked, then it will be as if he is not there to our children."

Dumbledore cleared his throat to give him a moment. "While I do understand what you are trying to accomplish, I do not believe that would be practical. There may be times that Professor Snape is the only teacher present in an area, or he may be assigned to watch over a group of children that your children happen to be in, such as a substitute for a teacher who is ill. There will be other instances, but those are the first I can think of."

"Headmaster," Emma said adamantly, "I don't care what the circumstances are, that man will not be around my children. I'm already walking a very fine line to keep Harry's trust, which demands that Snape be sacked. If you wish to keep Professor Snape at your

school at the same time that my children are there, that man will keep away from them ... in and out of the classroom. If you can not do that, they will attend another school."

"I see." Dumbledore wanted to pull his glasses off rub his eyes very badly, but he resisted. Harry must remain at the school and the Grangers were barely budging from their position. It was yet another temptation in his long life to use an Unforgiveable to force someone to do things his way, but he would not stoop to that. "Very well, I shall do my best to keep them apart. If the situation arises, I shall find another teacher to take his place and assign him to other duties."

"And lastly," Emma said, "should Professor Snape break any rule, no matter how small, for the rest of this year while he is on probation, he will be dismissed. Being transferred to another position, even if it is as a janitor, would not be acceptable."

That was the most difficult one. Severus would be sorely tempted to seek revenge on either of the children for this, Dumbledore thought. "I will agree to that condition as long as any punishment that Professor McGonagall disagrees with is merely cancelled and not counted as a violation of this condition. The size of awarding points can be subjective and not all teachers use the same method. Each teacher is merely required to use the same method for all students for balance."

"We will agree as long as we also agree on a time frame," Dan said. "We started off discussing a thirty day delay, but some of our items have discussed the rest of the school year. How about we make all conditions apply for the rest of the school year with a review every thirty days, say on the first of every month?"

The two parents looked adamant about wanting this, and Dumbledore could tell he would not talk them out of it. "Very well, I agree. May I discuss one other matter with you?"

"It is getting late, but since you are here..." Emma trailed off and looked interested to see what he would ask.

"I am curious as to how you became Harry's legal guardians." Dumbledore wondered if he could return Harry to the Dursleys home again. "It is very important for Harry to be protected when he is not at school, and the best place for him is with his aunt."

"He is never returning to that place with those people," Dan all but shouted.

Dumbledore was taken aback by the vehemence of the man, who had suddenly started to seethe in anger.

"Please forgive my husband, Headmaster, but you have touched a sore spot with him. He grew up in a milder version of the environment Harry has been living in, and has vowed that his children would never suffer like that," Emma explained as she put a hand on her husband's thigh to calm him. "To answer your question, once we found out about the deplorable conditions under which Harry was raised and what his relatives subjected him to, we checked his records and found that he was actually in legal limbo, having never been assigned any legal guardians according to the Queen's government. Therefore, we applied and were accepted, the final condition being Harry's acceptance, which he happily gave. A Judge of the Realm signed the order just before Christmas."

"I see..." Dumbledore started to wonder if he could retrieve all of those records.

"And I'm sure that copies of that legal decision are now in many different systems and filing cabinets," Emma said, as if reading his mind.

The impish smile on her face was maddening. "I'm sure," he politely agreed, understanding that Harry would now be living here and there

was nothing he could do about it.

"If there is nothing else that can't wait, I would suggest we call it an evening. All of us have jobs to do in the morning, or at least we do," Emma intimated.

"No, there is nothing else of importance at the moment. I do thank you for your time and understanding. I will owl you later with a status of how things are progressing," Dumbledore assured them.

"And you will take care of and correct the three problems on the complaint form that you are responsible for?" Emma innocently asked as she and Dan rose to escort their visitor to the door.

Dumbledore stayed silent as he rose and thought. "It was an oversight that Harry did not receive the proper materials, since we all think of him as coming from a Wizarding family."

Emma raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

"However, he will have them tomorrow. I do not believe trolls will be an issue any longer. The small clan that lived in the nearby forest has moved on."

When he stopped, Emma frowned and looked at her husband. "And the monster on the third floor?" Dan asked.

Dumbledore gave a hard smile. "I'm afraid that will have to stay. It is in everyone's best interest that the setup there remains."

"I see, then we shall just have to wait on the official complaint process to address it," Dan said, not giving an inch.

"Actually, as a matter of security, I shall have to drop that complaint," Dumbledore said a little forcefully.

"It was properly filed. Do you intend to break your own rules?" Dan asked, his voice rising slightly in disbelief. "If you do that, how can we trust you on the other agreement?"

"I will abide by our agreement, but the matter you question goes beyond all of us and things must stay as they are. I am truly sorry, but I must insist," Dumbledore told them.

For a tense moment, no one said anything. "I'm sorry, too," Dan said, none of his resolve gone. "I believe we are done for the night."

"I believe we are," Dumbledore said as he turned and headed for the door. He was sad that they had ended on a slightly sour note, but they just did not understand that the Philosopher's Stone had to stay where he could personally guard it for his plan to work.

"Good night, Headmaster," Dan told him, not as cordial as he had been at the beginning.

"Have a pleasant evening, and again, thank you for your time." He walked out and onto the front porch. That could have gone a lot better, but it was not a total disaster. It also reminded him why he did not argue with Filius Flitwick very often. The Grangers were just as logical and intelligent as his Charms Professor. Thinking of his house now, he Apparated away.

The Grangers watched from the window and saw the old man leave with a quiet crack. "That could have gone a lot better," Dan commented.

"True, but we accomplished most of what we wanted and allowed Hermione and Harry to stay where they so desperately want to attend school." She looked at him with a grimace. "Plan B for the monster?"

He nodded. "And for the troll too, I think." Dan drew his wife into a

hug. "You were magnificent this evening."

"You did quite well yourself." She lightly kissed him. "I guess the debate team was good for both of us," she said with a grin.

"Indubitably," he agreed.

Albus Dumbledore arrived in his office in a green flash of fire to find his Transfiguration and Potions professors waiting on him -- the former with a tea cup and the latter with a glass of brandy. Without saying a word, Albus walked over to his cabinets and poured himself a shot of Firewhisky, downing it in a single gulp. He stood there for a moment waiting. A burp came a few seconds later, emitting a small tongue of flames. He patted his mouth to make sure his beard was not on fire. Feeling the warmth spread in his stomach, he walked to his desk and took his seat. He noticed that Minerva had an incredulous look while Severus was smirking.

"Severus," he said very sternly, "I would wipe that smirk off of your face, as you are the reason for most of my present difficulty, and the reason I will be breaking my budget this year."

Minerva was taken aback. She had rarely seen Albus this upset. None of his normal calm was present.

"Headmaster," the Potion Master drawled.

"Severus!" The rebuke was sharp. "You would do well to listen. I have just spent one of the most frustrating hours of my long life trying to defend you and allow you to keep your job, and I was having to argue from a position that was all but indefensible." He looked over his desk and found the sheaf of complaints. The one for him was to the side, so he picked up the rest of them. "This is what you have been accused of, and given the minutely detailed way the

accusations have been documented, I strongly suspect they are all true. Have you read these?" He shook the papers in his hand.

"Minerva has shown them to me, but they are all rubbish," Snape defended himself.

"Oh?" Dumbledore asked, surprised. "Let's review one, shall we?" He read, "Sixth of September 1991, Friday, first year potions class, witnesses entire class, violation of section 3, paragraph 2, 'improper behaviour by a teacher'. Professor Snape derogatorily called Harry Potter a celebrity before he even called roll in the first class with the student. After calling roll, he immediately asked Harry Potter: 'What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?' When Harry didn't know, Professor Snape chided him that fame wasn't everything before asking, 'Where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?' When Harry said that he didn't know, Professor Snape said, 'Thought you wouldn't open a book before coming, eh, Potter?' He then asked Harry, 'What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfs-bane?' Professor Snape ignored Hermione Granger who had her hand in the air for all three questions. Professor Snape was clearly not instructing the class, but was making fun of Harry Potter, who had no reason to have memorized One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi or to have knowledge of a potion what would not have been taught until fourth year."

Dumbledore threw the complaints down on the desk. "While I was not there to witness this class, Severus, I am well aware of your hatred for James Potter and that you have basically transferred that to his son. Therefore, I'm quite willing to believe this as written. If I had to investigate this, what would you tell me about this incident?"

"Completely rubbish. I did ask Potter a few questions and he knew none of the answers, for which I explained the answers to the class as instruction after he finished making a fool of himself. I did nothing to him," Severus said firmly.

In the silence that followed, Minerva said, "While it has been a little more than fifty years, I am quite sure I would not have been able to answer any of those questions in my first Potions class either." She then fixed the man with a glare. "And I am appalled at your responses when Mr Potter said he did not know the answers."

"You believe the brat's description?" Severus was incredulous.

"I believe your name calling proves the point," McGonagall replied, her frown showing her disappointment in him. "You dislike Mr Potter for who he is; therefore, he can do no right and everything he does is wrong. Tell me, Severus, if I were to go ask the rest of my first years about that class, which version of the story would I get? Yours or his?"

When Severus said nothing, Albus continued. "That is but one of forty-seven complaints against you." Severus jerked in surprise at the number, showing Albus that the man had probably only read the first page. "Five of these accusations are about you causing or allowing dangerous situations in your classroom and are severe enough that if any one of them is true, I should dismiss you. The sheer number of complaints argue I should dismiss you anyway, should a majority of them found to be true." Albus sighed. "We both know why you are here and why I need to keep you here, but you have gone overboard."

Albus finally gave in to his earlier desire as he removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "While your actions are your own, I am partially to blame for not paying closer attention and reining you in sooner."

"Sooner? You were able to get that woman to drop the complaints, were you not?" Severus asked as if there could only be one possible answer.

"As I said earlier, it was a most frustrating hour. She would agree to

completely drop the complaints for one of two reasons, although I can now think of a third that would satisfy her." He shook his head slightly before donning his glasses again. "First, she said she would drop them all if you were immediately dismissed."

"But..." The protest died on Snape's lips as he saw the Headmaster was completely serious.

"While not mentioned, I believe she would also drop them if you resigned. The point being, she wants you out of the school and I can understand her point of view, even if I don't want that to happen," he said tiredly.

"I take it that you agreed to the third option?" Severus asked guardedly.

"I did; however, you might prefer the second option after I explain this one."

"What? To resign? Why would I do that?" Severus could not believe what he was hearing. He had a role and a job to fulfil here. Dumbledore had always supported him.

"Mr and Mrs Granger agreed that you could stay here if a few conditions were fulfilled. One," Dumbledore fixed him with an intense stare, "you will become the perfect teacher, following each and every rule in the teacher's manual to perfection." Snape's eyes flew to the top of his head in surprise. "You will teach and treat everyone fairly and without bias, whether in the classroom or out of it. You will also make sure there is never an unsafe situation in your Potions lab. Should there be a valid complaint against you after this, you would be dismissed immediately."

Snape gaped and his mouth moved for a few seconds with no sound coming out. When he found his voice again, he quietly said, "Headmaster, surely you aren't serious."

"Very." Albus looked it too.

A low chuckle caught both men's attention and they turned and saw Minerva with a rare smile. "I have told you before, Severus, that if you continued to be biased, it would come back to haunt you."

Severus sneered, but before he could say anything, Albus beat him to it.

"Minerva, you're not getting off scot-free in this," Albus replied with a small grin of his own, the first since he had returned.

"Excuse me?" she asked, unable to imagine what she would have to do for Severus to straighten up.

"Mrs Granger's second condition was that you would monitor the Rewards and Punishments book for the rest of the year, approving, changing, or cancelling all point changes and detentions that Severus awards which are out of bounds."

She never batted an eye. "So I get to clean up after him instead of just complaining to you about what he does?"

"You do," Albus agreed. "I delegate that task to you. However, I would suggest that you do it every day, say just before dinner, so that any detentions that are unjust are cancelled before they are served."

"I assume incorrect rewards and punishments are not enough to trigger his dismissal?" Minerva asked. Severus looked very interested in this question.

"Correct. Mrs Granger made allowances for this, knowing that such things are subjective and easily corrected," Albus explained.

"And the third condition?" Severus asked, not sure if he wanted to

hear. The first two had been bad enough.

"I must go find another Potions teacher to teach the lower years," Albus explained as he watched Severus's expression become horrified.

"I, I have to share my domain and my teaching responsibilities?" His lab and classroom were sacrosanct. They were set up perfectly. He was master of his domain. No one told him what to do with regards to Potions. "Never!" He shouted as he jumped to his feet. "I will not stand for it. I am the Potions Master."

Albus sat there as calmly as ever. "Then you plan to turn in your resignation?"

Severus stood there as a deer caught in the light, frozen in thought. A long moment later, he slumped back into his seat in defeat.

"I take it that you plan to become a model teacher and work with whomever I hire to work part-time to teach the lower two years?" Albus casually asked. He would not worry Severus with the thought that he would never teach Harry again, at least not now.

Severus weakly nodded, all fire extinguished from him.

"Very well, then, I would suggest you take a small dose of Pepperup and spend a few hours reacquainting yourself with the teacher's manual, since the Grangers have a copy of it," Albus told him.

"Albus, may I offer a suggestion?" Minerva spoke up.

"Please." Albus wondered what she had in mind to add to this.

"I believe it would be a good idea for all of the staff to reacquaint ourselves with the teacher's manual and the student's manual, too. Furthermore, I plan to hold a meeting with my house after dinner

tomorrow evening discussing the most important of those rules." She turned to look at Severus. "I believe it would be a good idea for all four of us -- the Heads of House -- to do that, as well as for Severus to point out to some of his students that we will be enforcing all of the rules now. As teachers, we have been too slack in preventing altercations, leaving only the messy job of cleanup."

Severus gave her severe look. "Exactly what are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting that you tell Mr Malfoy, in no uncertain words, that his shenanigans will no longer be tolerated. If I hear of him insulting anyone, especially those he may think are beneath him for some imagined reason like who their parents are, I will punish him most harshly; and you should as well," she suggested, strongly. "There would be far fewer problems if he were not so divisive and insulting, as well as obviously baiting others. If he enjoys doing that, he can do so at home."

Severus bristled.

"Minerva makes a good point. While it is not our place to teach the students morals, there are certain social standards we should uphold. Polite and civil behaviour is part of that." Albus fixed Severus with a stare, forcing him to accept the idea and to eventually nod his agreement. He looked very thoughtful for a moment. "Perhaps this will help prevent some of those who might go astray to stay on the path of the Light," he said softly, talking to himself. Then with a nod, he looked at his deputy. "I believe that is an excellent idea, Minerva. Severus, please do the same thing with your house. Minerva, please discuss this with Filius and Pomona. I shall make an announcement at lunch directing all students to their house after dinner for a short meeting." He felt pleased with the actions they had come up with.

"Is there anything else this evening, Headmaster?" Severus asked, still in mild shock over all the changes in the last hour -- changes that were turning his world upside down.

"Yes, there is one last condition on your ability to remain." Dumbledore was very curious as to what Severus's reaction to this one would be. "While it is partly my responsibility to make sure you are not put in this position, should you find yourself in the presence of either of the Grangers' children, you are to ignore them. I suppose the exception would be unless you need to do something prevent injury from coming to them."

Severus looked at him and merely blinked for a moment. "You make it sound as if I am to pretend they are not here."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair. "From your point of view, yes. From Emma Granger's point of view, it will be as if you are not at Hogwarts. I know you are not happy about this, but I also know that you understand that Harry must be here so I can properly guide him into his ... future."

Minerva gave him a strange look, but Dumbledore ignored it and focused on his Potions teacher. Eventually, the younger man said, "Very well. I understand you believe we all have our parts to play. I only hope you are correct. Is there anything else, Headmaster?"

"No, I believe that is all for now. I look forward to the 'new you' tomorrow, Severus. Happy reading." Dumbledore's smile and twinkling eyes returned to a mild level.

In disgust, Severus rose and abruptly turned, causing his cloak to billow out behind him as he left.

As the door closed behind the man, Minerva looked at her superior. "Do you think he'll really turn over a new leaf and manage to survive until the end of the year?"

Albus stood and walked back over to his cabinets and poured himself another shot of Firewhisky. He slowly swirled it as he thought. "He's

capable of doing so, but I believe the real test will come when Severus finds himself near Mr Potter and Miss Granger." He gulped the shot down and waited for a second. He burped and patted his beard. "Speaking of which. I must find a new Professor to teach part-time. Also, please inform the Grangers' charges tomorrow that they are excused from Potions for the next week. I should have someone in place by then. When they ask, tell them it is by their mother's wishes."

Minerva stood, but before she could leave, she had to ask one question. "Albus, was the conversation with the Grangers really that difficult?"

He looked at the bottle of Firewhisky, but decided he had had enough for the evening since he would need an early start tomorrow. "Have you had many discussions with Filius over something he believes in passionately?"

She nodded. "Twice that I can remember."

"Then you know of his ability to reduce complex issues to simple statements that when he states them, you have to agree with him or look like an idiot?" He wondered what her discussions had been about.

Minerva shuddered. "The first time, our discussion was on something we relatively agreed on and our differences were minor. The second, we were diametrically opposed at the beginning. Ten minutes later, I was nodding and agreeing with him, unsure how I got to that point, but his views were so obvious and logical I was swayed before I realized it."

Albus chuckled. "Talking with the Grangers was eerily similar. How do I disagree with someone who tells me that my job is to make sure the school is safe and the students have the best education possible?"

"And then proceeds to point out how you're not doing that by having Severus on staff?" she asked with the barest of smiles.

He nodded. "It was maddening and worse than dealing with the Wizengamot. By the way, please give Mr Potter his 'Introduction to the Wizarding World' materials."

"I'll do so tomorrow. Good night, Albus."

"Good night, Minerva." He watched her leave and then headed to his quarters. Who was he going to hire that would satisfy the Grangers and who would also get along with Severus? This was as bad as having to find a new Defence teacher every year.

Earlier that evening after Harry had returned from his meeting in the Headmaster's office, he found a lumpy package on his bed. He opened it up and found a note. "This was your father's. Please use it wisely." There was no name. Removing the rest of the paper, he found a bundle of thin silvery cloth.

"Whoa!" Harry heard from behind him. Turning, he saw Ron with a very surprised look. "Do you know what that is, mate?"

"No," Harry answered. "What?"

"Put it on around your shoulders. It's the only way to be sure." Ron came closer to inspect it.

Harry shrugged and did as his friend asked. At his friend's gasp, Harry looked down and saw that his body had disappeared. "What happened?"

"It's an Invisibility Cloak. I've heard my brother Bill talk about them.

They're supposed to be rare. Where did it come from?" Ron was waving his arm near Harry's shoulder, trying to find it when he could not see it.

"It was on my bed with a note but no name," Harry explained.

Ron laughed. "Do you know how much fun you can have with this?"

Harry put the cloak into his trunk and they talked about what could be done with it for the next half hour.

Harry and Hermione went to breakfast the next morning, accompanied by Ron. There was still a little unease between the three, mostly between Ron and Hermione, but they were doing their best to ignore it and be friends anyway.

When they had dished their food and Ron was engaged in talking to Seamus, Harry whispered, "Guess what I found on my bed last night?"

Hermione shrugged.

"There was a package with a note saying that it was my father's. When I opened it, I found a silvery cloak." Hermione still looked lost. "An Invisibility Cloak," he finally whispered. The effect of the last statement was amazing.

Hermione sat up even straighter and it appeared she was about to shout "What?", so Harry quickly put his hand over her mouth.

"What?" Ron asked seeing the commotion.

"Nothing," Harry half-lied. "I was just teasing Hermione."

"Oh?" Ron looked eager, as did Seamus.

"Err, sorry, but that wouldn't be fair to her if I told you," Harry quickly made up. He got a couple of glowers, but the matter was dropped. It took several minutes before the other boys were occupied again. Harry bet Hermione was about to lose it in having to wait, something he found amusing.

"Explain," she growled in a low voice when they had a moment to themselves again.

"There's not much else to say," he whispered. "I found it there with the note that it was my father's and to use it wisely. Ron's the only other person who knows about it. It could be dead useful." He left 'fun' off of the list purposefully.

"It could also get you into a lot of trouble," she quietly said.

"It could also allow someone to make a late night run to the library for a book she has to have before the next day, too," he teased her, knowing that would set certain thoughts in motion. He watched her close her eyes, trying to gauge how much she was restraining herself.

"That is so unfair of you to bring up," she quietly hissed.

Harry just speared another sausage and ate it, wondering how else she might want to use the cloak.

As they finished their meal, their Head of House walked over to them and placed a small plainly wrapped package in front of Harry. "Mr Potter, here are the materials we owe you. I will apologize to you for this being missed. While most of us on the staff know where you were raised, we still tend to think of you in terms of your parents. If you feel there is anything else you are missing, or have questions about, please do not hesitate to come see me."

It was not hard to guess what was in the package, based on her

apology and on the complaint that was turned in last night. "Thank you, Professor."

She nodded and walked off.

"What's in the package, mate?" Ron asked, jabbing his fork in the direction of the package.

"Materials about the school that they give to all of the Muggle-borns. They forgot to give them to me earlier." Not that he needed it now, since he had read Hermione's over the holidays, but he did appreciate them making up for the oversight so he could have his own copy. Ron gave him a strange look, but said nothing.

They soon went to class for the morning.

At lunchtime, everyone was surprised when the Headmaster stood and knocked his fork on his goblet. Announcements were usually made at dinner.

"May I have your attention please?" Dumbledore waited a moment for all the voices to quiet down. "While I would normally announce this at dinner, I wanted to give everyone a little more notice, as I know that people sometimes miss our evening meal. There will be a mandatory meeting for everyone, no exceptions, in your common room this evening immediately after dinner. So please be in your common room by seven o'clock to listen to your Head of House and ask questions. Prefects, please be sure everyone who is not here knows of this announcement. Thank you." He sat back down and watched the chatter start up about what the meeting could be about.

"Albus?" Minerva got his attention. "Have you had any ideas on whom to hire for the new Potions position?"

He gave her his winning smile. "Actually, I believe I've had a stroke of genius and I have an interview this afternoon. Have you told Mr

Potter and Miss Granger not to attend Potions yet?"

"No, I thought I'd wait until this evening," she informed him.

"Yes, this may work out well then. Hopefully, I'll have someone hired by the end of the day and you can avoid that issue."

"Who are you interviewing?" She was very curious.

He chuckled. "I'm sorry, Minerva, but I shall have to keep that to myself for the moment. I wouldn't want to jinx myself."

Minerva just raised an eyebrow and shook her head slowly, which created a few more chuckles from her superior.

The rumour mill was in full force. Stories abounded, ranging from getting a new Headmaster to Hogwarts being physically relocated. As everyone headed back to their common room after dinner, the meeting was all anyone could talk about. Even Hermione joined in, guessing that new school rules were about to be put in place. Harry was not sure what to guess, but agreed with Hermione that it was probably something to do with all the complaints they had turned in last night, an event they had told no one about. When Ron had asked about what McGonagall had wanted last night, Harry had said she had questions about his family and the holidays. All true, but with much left out.

Professor McGonagall swept into the room and looked at the Prefects. "Is everyone accounted for?"

"Yes, Professor," the seventh year boy Prefect answered.

"Good," and she raised her voice. "May I have your attention please, everyone! It has come to the staff's attention that we have become

lax in upholding the school policies. To that end, I would strongly encourage each of you to read the student handbook every one of you received when you started school. If you have lost yours or have left it at home, please borrow a friend's or find a copy in the library to borrow. The staff will be more strictly enforcing the school rules." There were several moans about this.

"I expect each and every one of you," McGonagall continued firmly, trying to look at each student to impress upon them the seriousness of this, especially the Weasley twins, "to do the right thing and uphold the good name of Gryffindor. I will be especially vigilant in watching for students who insult others, start fights, or bait others to start fights. I shall be most disappointed if any Gryffindor is caught doing so and they will be harshly disciplined. There is no reason for you not to be well behaved gentlemen and ladies as social custom demands. Are there any questions at all?"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other and smiled.

"Professor?" One of the fourth year boys raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr Wilkes."

"I'm thinking this is a good change, but what about when we're cornered by some of the older Slytherins and there is no professor around?"

"You will do your best to avoid any fighting and come find me. I will investigate and correct any problems. If you give a false report, be prepared for the punishment to be applied to you. If the attack is magical, shield and put up a good magical defence. I believe it would be safe to say that someone will be along fairly quickly to straighten things out."

The boy nodded. "Fair enough. Thank you, Professor."

"Any other questions?" She looked around and no hands were raised. "Very well. Please review the rules. The excuse of 'I didn't know' will not be accepted. Have a good evening."

Minerva waited around for a moment in case anyone had a question for her they were afraid to ask in front of the whole house, but no one approached her, so she left after a few minutes. In a way, she was very grateful for Emma Granger and her stance.

Ron was feeling pretty good after their Head of House's announcement. He looked at his best friend. "Harry, you suppose this will mean that Malfoy won't be such a git anymore? Or do you think he'll try anyway?"

Harry shrugged before he grinned. "We can hope he'll leave us alone."

"I'll be back in a minute," Hermione told them. "I need to go get my book bag so we can start homework."

"Good idea, I'll get mine too," Harry said. "Ron, are you going to join us?"

"Why?" he asked a little incredulously. "Nothing is due tomorrow."

Hermione rolled her eyes and walked towards the stairs to the girl's dorm.

"What to play some chess, Harry?"

"Maybe after I finished my homework," Harry informed him and started towards his dorm room.

"Why, Harry? There's plenty of time before any of that's due. Just one game?" Ron practically begged him as he followed his friend up the first few stairs.

"Sorry, Ron."

"Bloody hell, you're sounding just like her now," Ron complained, unaware that was a bad thing to say, and not because of his word choice.

Harry whirled around. "Don't talk that way about Hermione," he said a little angrily, his protective streak coming out.

"Sorry, Harry, I didn't mean it that way, you know, badly," Ron back-pedalled, keenly aware that this friendship was still new.

"Then how did you mean it?" Harry asked, trying to calm himself, giving his friend the benefit of the doubt until he found out otherwise.

"I just meant that you've changed. You weren't like this, so studious, before..."

Harry wanted to say how stupidly his friend was acting, but a previous conversation came to mind and he decided to use it. "Ron, why are you here, at school?"

"Because my parents want me here," he said, as if it should have been obvious.

Harry shook his head. "That's the main reason you're here?"

"Yeah," Ron answered. "Aren't you here because you were sent too?"

"I was sent, but that's not why I'm here." At his friend's puzzled look, Harry went on. "Ron, this is a school, so I'm here to learn. That means I do my best to get all of my homework done; to do well on everything I can to be the best wizard I can."

"You sound just like Hermione. You've been hanging out too much with her, mate."

That was too much for Harry. He put a hand on Ron's chest and shoved him back against the wall of the stairs they were on.

"Hey!" Ron shouted, very surprised.

"You will leave her alone, Ron. She knows what she's doing, apparently, unlike you. We both want to do well here. If I have extra time, I'll play chess with you, but that's only after I do all of my schoolwork," Harry said pointedly. "If you're going to say bad things about her again, you can stop pretending to be our friend, because friends don't put each other down."

Ron gulped. "I'm sorry, I really didn't mean it that way. I was just trying to say that you've changed."

"And I like how I've changed," Harry told him, letting go of Ron. "I've got a family now, one that cares for me, and I want to do my best for them."

"I thought you already had a family, you know, your aunt," Ron half said half asked.

Harry snorted. "My relatives don't care about me. Over the holidays, Hermione's parents became my legal guardians."

"Well that explains a lot." Harry's eyes narrowed, and Ron became nervous and quickly added. "I didn't say it was bad, but it does explain why you've changed."

After a long moment, Harry nodded, satisfied with the explanation. "Please don't tell anyone though." Ron nodded and Harry resumed going up to his dorm room. Ron looked after his friend and shook his head before he turned and went back into the common room.

Meanwhile, Severus Snape swept into the Slytherin, fixing the two seventh year Prefects with a questioning look. With neutral masks, they both gave him a nod.

Letting his expression grow a touch colder, he addressed his house. "You will listen very carefully to what I have to tell you -- all of you. There has been a significant change recently. I would strongly advise each and every one of you to spend time this evening reading your school handbook." He got a number of puzzled looks and heard a few whispers. "You should become very acquainted with the rules you should follow and use this as a challenge to show why you are a Slytherin." He paused to look around.

"Use what, Sir?" sixth year Marcus Flint asked.

Snape looked at the burly young man. "Since you didn't seem to understand, I'll say very plainly that the reason you need to know the rules is because they are to be strictly enforced as of tomorrow morning, and I mean every rule in the book. This also includes all the rules I must follow as your Professor and Head of House."

"But..." someone started to say.

"What was not clear?!" he all but shouted, leaving silence after his outburst, before he continued in his previous cold manner. "There are rules but we are the cunning and ambitious. We will find a way to get ahead even while working within the letter of these rules."

"One last warning..." Snape looked around, but ended with his gaze focused on Draco Malfoy. "Many of the other teachers will be very vigilant to watch for anyone from this house insulting others, or trying to bait someone from another house into starting a fight. I am even being forced to do so as well." He did not miss the angry look on

Draco's face. "So I strongly suggest you do not do such a thing in my presence any longer. You will not be happy if you force me to take points from my house. Are there any questions?"

He again looked around the room. There were various upset expressions and the shaking of heads, no doubt muttering about what the world was coming to. When no one had asked anything by his mental count of five, he abruptly turned and left for his quarters.

In his room, he poured himself a shot of Firewhisky and quickly downed it. He belched the small flames on his way to bed. He would take a short nap before he took his turn patrolling the corridors. As he lay down, a part of him wondered why he even bothered with this life anymore. Another part of his mind answered with the faded image of a young red-haired woman and the vow made over her grave. One day he would have his revenge for her death. If he was still alive afterwards, he would shove this forsaken job up or down Albus's body, depending on which orifice was presented first.

((A/N: I hope that cleared a few things up. As book3 and the permission slip problem showed us, Muggle guardians do have a say over their children in the Magical world. First year will end in the next chapter. As you can see, I'm focusing only on the major events and the changes. We don't want the story to drag and become boring, do we? :-))

Chapter 4 - More Corrections

The next morning, the students were surprised to see a new professor at the head table. The new professor was sitting between Professors Sprout and Snape, talking to the Herbology professor. She was about the age of their parents and pretty with an aristocratic look. She sat and ate with proper manners. She had very dark brown hair down to her shoulders, and her elegant look was in sharp contrast to Snape, who looked far more unhappy than normal.

Harry noticed something besides the new professor. Nudging Hermione, he whispered, "Look at Malfoy; he seems upset with something."

Hermione looked across the room and found that Harry was correct. Draco Malfoy did not look happy as he stabbed at his food, with an occasional glance to the head table. "If the Slytherins had the same talk that we did last night, perhaps he has realized that Snape will not allow him to get away with breaking so many rules," she theorized.

"Maybe," Harry quietly said. "We can always hope."

Midway through breakfast, the Headmaster stood and rapped his fork on his goblet. The room instantly became quiet. "Thank you," he told everyone, as he looked over the student body. "No doubt you are wondering who our new professor is. I'd like to introduce Professor Andromeda Tonks. She will be here on a part-time basis to teach the first two years of Potions."

There were many murmurings at that admission.

"Professor Snape has become rather busy and this should help give him more time." Dumbledore was pleased to see that both Harry and Hermione looked surprised at this news, as it suggested this was completely the elder Granger's idea. "For those of you in the first and second years, your classroom will be in another Potions lab two

doors down from Professor Snape's classroom at your usual time. There will be no schedule changes. Thank you for your attention."

"Brilliant!" Ron exclaimed. "No more Snape this year." His comment got several agreements from classmates around him. However, after a moment, he stopped participating in those conversations and looked at his friends across the table. "Wait a minute. Why aren't you telling me to stop, Hermione?"

Hermione shook her head slightly. "Because while I can respect him as a knowledgeable person, he's really not a very good teacher; therefore, I look forward to see how Professor Tonks teaches."

"Harry?" Ron asked, wondering what his friend would say.

Harry tilted his head towards Hermione. "What she said, although I don't have respect for him in any form."

Surprisingly to Ron, Hermione did not raise any fuss over Harry's statement.

Hundreds of miles to the south, a tawny owl was winging its way across London.

The next morning contained a surprise for everyone. None was more surprised to read the morning's Daily Prophet than Albus Dumbledore.

How Unsafe Is Hogwarts?

Yesterday, we received a letter detailing two major safety breaches at Hogwarts School for Wizardry and Witchcraft. One has already put students at risk, and the other is still risking the very lives of students

at this moment.

We have been able to verify that a troll was loose in the dungeons on the evening of Halloween. Whilst the students were having their annual Halloween Feast, Professor Quirrell, currently teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts, ran into the Great Hall and announced that a troll was in the dungeons. Headmaster Albus Dumbledore then sent the students back to their common rooms. The troll was later found in a girl's bathroom on the dungeon level.

There are several problems with this story. How did a troll enter Hogwarts? Shouldn't the defensive wards have prevented that? If the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor found the troll, why was he not able to subdue it or contain it in a room? Why doesn't Hogwarts have a better Defence professor? Why were the Slytherin students sent to their common room, which is in the dungeons, since that was the area the troll was known to be in? Wouldn't it have been safer to keep all of the students in the Great Hall where they already were? What happened to the troll? Besides the Slytherins, were any other students at risk?

That last question is even more interesting because there is no official report of students being at risk, yet the letter we received mentioned that two students accidentally came across the troll on their own and barely escaped with their lives.

While the troll incident is past, there is a current safety issue that has been present all year and remains today. At the Welcoming Feast, Headmaster Dumbledore warned the students not to venture to the third floor corridor unless they wished a most painful death. No classes have been taken to that corridor to date, however, indicating that what is up there has nothing to do with the school or what students are being taught. Also, we have heard that multiple students have opened a locked door in that corridor -- despite the warning -- to find a Cerberus! What is a Cerberus doing in a school? What is it guarding? Should what is behind the three-headed monster be in a

school full of children if it needs such a dangerous guard? Will a child be killed by the monster? Or will whatever is hidden in the school attract criminals who could hurt the students as they go after the hidden item?

As bad as that news is, there is one last unanswered question. Why are we just now finding out about these safety issues? All that remains is to ask: What now, and who will protect the children since the current staff at Hogwarts appear unwilling or unable to?

Albus closed his eyes for a moment, questioning fate about why this had to happen now. To be honest, he had a good idea why this was happening now as it had all the characteristics of Emma Granger.

"What did you tell the Grangers?" he heard from his deputy. "This reads like a tale from a scorned woman," Minerva casually said, as if discussing what lunch might bring.

"I did my best to explain to her that the topic of the third floor was of importance to the Wizarding World and removing what was there was not an option," he tiredly said.

McGonagall harrumphed. "It appears she believes differently and has sought aid in removing the item."

"Yes, and the Prophet seems willing to help her, as long as it stirs up controversy," Dumbledore idly agreed as he considered the ramifications. "The Minister will be most happy to step forward and claim to be helping the children here." He sighed heavily. "I had better contact Nicholas and have him find another hiding location before the Minister arrives."

"I believe you're too late for that," Minerva said as she watched the Minister, Director Bones, and four Aurors enter the Great Hall and walk directly toward them.

"Please don't say it, Minerva," Dumbledore quietly said as he stood to greet the guests, who were the centre of attention.

McGonagall almost smiled as she thought 'I told you so', but she managed to maintain her normal expression. She had argued with him for most of the summer to not bring the Philosopher's Stone into the school.

"Ah, Minister Fudge, Director Bones, what a welcome surprise," Dumbledore greeted them. "Why don't we travel to my office for a little more privacy?"

"Dumbledore," Fudge greeted him with a nod. "We have much to discuss," he said with confidence.

The Headmaster would have preferred the Minister not have as much confidence, but one rarely got everything one wanted in life. "Professor McGonagall, would you join us please?" He led the entourage out through the side door the Professors used, quite sure he was about to have a discussion he did not wish to have.

All of the Gryffindor first-years were walking from breakfast to their first class of the day: Potions. The Slytherins were a little ahead. The two groups kept themselves separated quite deliberately.

"What do you suppose that was all about?" Ron asked those around him. "I mean, it's not every day the Minister for Magic walks into school."

Hermione shot Harry a significant look before she answered, "Didn't you see what was on the front page of the newspaper, Ron?"

"Yeah, so? The Minister may be here for something else, though."

Hermione started to argue back, but Harry reached out and squeezed her arm for a moment, stopping her. It only took a split second for her to realize what Harry was trying to tell her non-verbally. This was a pointless argument.

No one answered Ron and he did not seem upset at that.

When they arrived at their new Potions classroom, the door was already open. Inside, they found their new teacher already at her desk waiting on them and the Slytherins taking up most of the desks near the front. The room was bright with off-white walls. There were numerous charts around the room, but nothing like all the jars of vile looking things like Snape's room had.

As soon as everyone had found a seat, the professor picked up a sheet of parchment and started calling roll, looking up at each student to try to put a name with a face. When she got to Harry's name, he felt that she looked a fraction of a second longer, but that was the only difference. So far, he thought she was being reasonable.

"Good morning, everyone, I am Professor Andromeda Tonks and I am here to teach you Potions," she said calmly with a slight smile, her pleasant voice easily reaching the back of the room. "While I am well versed in the art, I will admit up front that I do not have a mastery in the subject -- yet. However, I am presently working on earning my mastery and I should have one in the near future. For the level you are presently at, I do not expect any problems."

"I will only be here part-time; I am not a full-time resident professor. I live at home with my husband and a daughter, who recently graduated from Hogwarts. Because I do not live here, my office hours will be limited and you should plan accordingly. I will be here starting at seven in the morning and will leave after lunch. If I am not in this classroom teaching, you are welcome to stop by my office, which is next door, and ask me questions about class. Are there any

questions so far?"

Hermione stuck her hand in the air.

"Yes, Miss ... Granger, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Professor. Do you plan to start where Professor Snape left off, or do you have a different course plan?"

"Very good question, Miss Granger. I shall start with a review for a week or two, and depending on how everyone does, I expect we shall start approximately where you left off with Professor Snape." She turned around and picked a book off of her desk and held it up. "How many of you have seen this book, Magical Substances and Their Reactions to You? Raise you hands if you have, please?"

Hermione raised her hand and saw that she was the only Gryffindor, while all of the Slytherins raised their hands. Her eyes narrowed as only one possibility for this occurrence entered her head, and she was not pleased with it. She had run across the book only because she had tried to find an introductory book for each of her subjects in the Hogwarts library.

"I see," the professor drawled and did not look happy. "Please raise your hand if you have your own copy?"

Hermione's hand went down and all the Slytherin hands stayed up.

"You may put your hands down." Professor Tonks put the book back on her desk with a heavy thump. "I will have a box of those books by your next class period. You will use it for the remainder of your time in Hogwarts and it is imperative that you have it and keep it with you if you plan to do well in this class. Now, let's start with a review of the material from your first term..."

Hermione wondered if she needed to file another complaint, but after

thinking about Professor Tonks' reaction to her book survey, she doubted that she would need to. It also appeared that she was about to get a free book, which would be a nice compensation.

Andromeda Tonks stormed into the Great Hall for lunch; she did it regally, but there was no doubting that she was angry at the moment. As she reached the head table, Pomona Sprout was about to sit down next to Minerva. "Pomona? May I please borrow your seat for the meal? I desperately need a quick conference with Minerva." The headmaster normally sat on Minerva's other side, so she could not use that seat.

The Herbology teacher gave her a gracious smile and slipped over one chair.

Professor Tonks took her borrowed place. When she looked at the Deputy Headmistress, she found a quizzical look.

"What can I help you with, Andromeda?" McGonagall had already started eating, having arrived a few minutes before.

The new teacher served herself some food while she composed herself. She prided herself on being able to maintain an even keel, reacting as needed, instead of to the emotion of the moment. It was in her upbringing from the house of Black. But this situation infuriated her. "Minerva, I know that I'm allowed to give detentions to students who commit a large enough offence, but am I allowed to punish other teachers too?" A touch of exasperation and anger had crept into her voice at the end and she worked again to push that down.

A greying eyebrow arched its way up McGonagall's forehead. "Oh? What has Severus done now?"

"I suppose that wasn't too hard to guess, was it?" Andromeda asked

before she ate a little, hoping to settle her upset stomach from her anger.

"No, it wasn't. However, Albus and I do have that authority. What has happened?" It was just as well that Albus was still tied up with the Ministry, Minerva thought. She could probably handle the younger witch better than Albus could, as she sympathized with her feelings about Severus.

"That ... man," she finally said, restraining herself, "has sabotaged at least seven years of Potions students and probably every year he has been here. He has deliberately ensured that only Slytherins would do well in Potions."

McGonagall's eyes went wide and she jerked up in her seat, fork frozen on its way to her plate.

"I took a survey in my classes, the last just before lunch, and in all the first and second year classes, only the Slytherins had a magical substance reaction book. That book should be on the required book list! If the students don't know how substances react together, how are they to know what to do in their labs when something goes wrong, or better still, how to prevent accidents? I love my old house, but what he's done is criminal."

Minerva stirred herself and leaned forward slightly to look down the table, noting that Severus had come in. He was at the far end of the table, safely out of hearing while the room was so noisy during lunch. "So only the Slytherins have this required book?" she asked, wanting to be very sure of her facts.

"Yes. A few of the Ravenclaws and one Gryffindor had seen it in the library, but none of them had their own copy for study or usage."

"I assume the Gryffindor was Miss Granger?" Minerva asked with a slight smile. She hated to have favourites, but Miss Granger was

working her way into that category.

Andromeda nodded as she swallowed. "That girl really should have been in Ravenclaw."

"Yes, so Filius tells me constantly," she mused. "So what needs to be done, in your opinion, Professor?" adding the title to get the conversation back on track.

"I believe that the school needs to buy the book for every student who does not have one, since it should have been on the required list and the professor failed to include it out of obvious spite," Andromeda said, barely containing herself again. "The book costs about a Galleon and a half. We'd probably have to order it direct from the publisher, as I would not expect the book store to have enough on hand."

"Hmm..." Minerva did the math in her head. "That would be approximately three hundred and twenty Galleons, not a small sum. However, it might make a nice ... fine ... if I can talk Albus into it. Your Slytherin traits are alive and well, my dear."

For the first time in the conversation, Andromeda smiled.

"Yes," Minerva quietly said, as if agreeing with someone. "That would do nicely. I shall have to search our records and if Horace Slughorn recommended that book, then it would further show that its disappearance from the curriculum was purposeful."

"Minerva?" Andromeda gently got her attention. "Slughorn did indeed tell all of his students to get the book. It was how I was introduced to it. It is a standard in the subject of Potions -- everywhere."

"I see, and that should simplify matters." Minerva took a drink from her goblet. "I would suggest that you steer a wide course around Severus for the rest of the week."

"That's probably a good idea for his sake as well as for mine," she quipped, her usual good nature starting to reassert itself.

McGonagall almost laughed, but suppressed it and only let a wan smile out. Full blown laughter would ruin her image with the students. "If you'll stop by my office or classroom before you leave with the name of the book and publisher, I'll send a letter out tonight with the order, assuming Albus frees up sometime soon."

"Thank you, Minerva," Andromeda told her very sincerely.

"I'm glad to help. It is part of my job, as I was recently reminded by one of our student's parents," Minerva replied as she reached for a small piece of dessert.

"Oh?" The intense curiosity in Andromeda's question could not be missed.

"Let's just say that certain complaints have reminded several of us as to exactly why we're here. Personally speaking," Minerva said, lowering her voice and leaning in a little. "I'm glad it happened and I appreciate the reminder. Such a thing is good for all of us from time to time."

Andromeda nodded. Albus had said that a few things had changed recently, which was why she had been offered the job. She wondered exactly what had happened, but it was plain that Minerva would not be very forthcoming with details. That implied there was dirty laundry and it was not hard to guess whose robes were the dirtiest, based on what she had confirmed in class that morning.

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, wearily walked into the Great Hall for dinner. It had been a very trying day. Dealing with the

Minister and the Director of the MLE had been bad enough, but then he had also received numerous Floo calls and Howlers over the contents of the Daily Prophet article, greatly slowing down his meeting with the Ministry officials. After that had been the difficulty of dealing with the board of governors for the school. The real cake-topper had come when Nicholas Flamel had walked in his office and demanded his Stone back. While Nicholas had not blurted out the real reason for the Stone being at the school -- to act as a magnet for Voldemort -- he had implied it and Albus was sure Amelia Bones had caught the implication, even if she had not commented on it.

The most embarrassing part of the day had been when he had led Nicholas and the Ministry group to the third floor. Nicholas had pulled out his wand and transfigured the three-headed dog into a three-headed mouse before opening up the trapdoor and shooting a fireball into the hole and then jumping down onto a number of cushioning charms. By the time Albus went after him and caught up, Nicholas had transfigured the locked door to paper and was walking through it. Before Albus could stop him, Nicholas had shrunk the giant chess set and was walking across the room. He barely slowed down for the door that led to the troll room. As soon as the door was open and he saw what was in there, he cast a sticking charm on the wall and banished the troll over to the wall.

"Now we know why there was a troll in the castle on Halloween," Director Bones said acidly as she walked in. "The first one got away from you, didn't it, Dumbledore?"

Albus did not bother to answer, still hurrying after his mentor. However, he was not fast enough and the magical flames leapt up in front of him, causing a gasp from Director Bones. By the time he had dispelled the borderline Dark Magic, Minister Fudge had finally caught up. The three of them found the room with the potions empty and the flames on the other side were no more. They hurried to the last room, arriving just in time to see Nicholas cast a blasting spell at

a red object on the floor, spraying red dust over a small area as the spell hit.

The oldest man in world looked up at those entering the last chamber. "Really, Albus, if that's the best you can do for traps, you should be ashamed of yourself. Well, my Stone is gone and my wife and I must take care of a few things before our time is up. We have been bored with life for most of the last century, so I suppose this will make a nice change. Considering how matters stand at the moment, I believe this is the last time you will see me, Albus."

Albus watched the spry old man walk out without a backwards glance. The disappointment on his mentor's face hurt.

"Did you see that?" Fudge asked excitedly now that Flamel and his impressive presence was gone, allowing Fudge's tongue to work again. "He hardly paused walking as he passed all of the traps." He glowered at Dumbledore. "So much for the Stone being well protected."

"Perenelle once said he was brilliant when he was young. Over six hundred years of experience would only build upon that, Minister," Dumbledore said thoughtfully.

Albus Dumbledore shook his head to clear the thoughts of the afternoon. The school was indeed safer, but was the world? His goal of trapping Voldemort, or at least of exposing his continued existence, was unsuccessful and now out of reach.

His mind returned to the present as he reached his golden chair at the head table. Albus noticed that most of the students were present, so he tapped his fork against his goblet. With all eyes staring at him, he announced, "While all of the safeguards are not yet gone, the object on the third floor that was behind all of the danger is now gone. The last of the safeguards will be removed this evening and you may venture there as of tomorrow morning, although I dare say you will

find it quite boring. Have a pleasant dinner."

A small roar of conversation started as all of the students discussed the announcement. Hidden by all the noise, Minerva leaned over to him and said, "Another problem with Severus has arisen while you were occupied this afternoon."

He closed his eyes for a moment before turning to her. She had her usual austere look, but there was also a touch of anger. "What happened?" he simply asked. Many years had taught him that simple approach.

She explained what Andromeda Tonks had said. "I wanted to place the order for two hundred and twelve books tonight after dinner."

Severus would not be happy, but he could see the logic in charging the order to him, as a fine. The thought of Emma Granger getting a hold of this information filled him with dread. Yes, this needed to be taken care of as soon as possible. "Please go ahead and place the order, signing for it as Deputy Headmaster so it comes out of school funds," he told her. "I will take make sure those funds are recovered from Severus's pay-check, even if that is the majority of this month's pay."

Albus wondered if there was anything else that Severus had done that he needed to know about. Perhaps it was time for another conversation between just the two of them.

To the surprise of everyone, Quirinus Quirrell not only missed breakfast the next day, but he missed his first class as well. Dumbledore went to the man's quarters to see if he was ill. After unlocking the man's door and going in, he quickly found him on the floor, sprawled in a twisted position as if he had had a seizure. The exceedingly pale colour of his skin left no doubt as to why he had

missed breakfast and class.

A few diagnostic spells left Albus no more knowledgeable about the man's demise than before. Perhaps Poppy would have better luck with the cause of death, but he suspected not. He sighed as he considered having to find a new Defence professor for the term. It was barely mid-January. Usually they lasted until at least late May.

He closed the door to Quirrell's quarters and headed off to find Poppy. Perhaps he could get one of his older friends to do this if he promised them it was only for the last few months of the year. He started to wonder what Dedalus Diggle was doing these days.

Harry and Hermione hurried to the carriages so they could board the Hogwarts Express to go home for the summer. Ron was tagging along, as usual, and engaging Harry in talk about Quidditch, also as usual.

Neville was also walking with them, which was not common, though he did spend some time with the pair/trio from time to time. He and Hermione were talking about useful magical plants that could be grown around a Muggle home and not seem out of place. Hermione was most interested in any that could be used for potion ingredients.

The four found a compartment on the train and settled in. After putting her things up, Hermione pulled out a book on Runes.

Ron noticed the book and shook his head. "Hermione, you do realize that we're about to start summer holiday and you could wait to start your summer homework until the last week in August and still have plenty of time to finish, right?"

"This isn't for summer homework, Ron. Professor Dumbledore lent me this book from his personal library." She was leafing through the book, searching for something.

"Then why did you ask for it?" Ron persisted.

"Because Professor Dumbledore is coming to our home this evening to put some protective wards up and I wanted to know specifically what he is doing," she replied as she put a slip of parchment in the book to mark a page before continuing her search.

"That could be interesting to watch," Neville commented. "You might get to see some really awesome magic."

"I think it will be fascinating," Hermione agreed.

"I'll be curious to see what the wards do," Harry said.

"Mental, all of you," Ron said with a snort. "So Harry, you caught the Snitch in all your games this year and Gryffindor got the cup. Think you can do it next year, too?"

Hermione shook her head as she continued to skim the book and listen to the conversation at the same time. She was starting to think that Ron only had a three track mind. The question in her mind was what would happen to him in a few years. Would girls become track number four, or would it replace one of his other current loves: Quidditch, chess, and food? She was very happy that Harry took a broader view of life.

When the train pulled into King's Cross, everyone exited the train as quickly as possible. They rushed to find family and enjoy the next two months away from school. Harry and Hermione were no different. However, like the other Muggle-borns, their family was not on Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, as they could not come through the magical portal.

On their way to the Portal, they were stopped for a moment by Ron. "Harry, Hermione!" Ron shouted and waved them over. He had

already found his parents and little sister. Percy and the twins were not there yet.

They walked over, dragging their trunks behind them. They had cast a lightening spell on their trunks to make it easier to carry the heavy trunks. It was a second year spell, but Hermione had searched for it specifically for travelling and they had both learned it.

"Hello Mr and Mrs Weasley." Harry greeted them. When he saw Ron's little sister, he added, "And hello ... Ginny, right?"

Ginny blushed and shyly looked down for a second, before she looked back up at him and beamed. "Hi, Harry."

He heard Hermione make a small noise, so he looked over and saw her smiling at him. In fact, it almost looked like she was about to laugh at him. He was not sure why, so he tried to remind himself to ask her later.

As he looked back up, he realized the Weasley parents were looking at him and smiling.

"Hello, Harry and Hermione," Mrs Weasley greeted them. "It's good to see you. I trust everything went well this term?"

"Yes, ma'am," he answered.

"We're very well, thank you," Hermione answered right after him. "It's nice to see you again, but if you don't mind, we need to find our parents. I'm sure they're waiting for us outside."

"Yes, of course. We'll be right behind you." Mrs Weasley grabbed her daughter's hand. "Come along boys," she called. Percy had just walked up and the twins were almost there.

As they were leaving, Mr Weasley walked next to Hermione. "Your

parents are Muggles, are they not?"

"Yes, sir," she answered.

"Splendid!" Mr Weasley said, as if he had just won a contest. "Do you suppose they would have a few minutes for me? I'd like to ask them a few questions."

"I don't think that would be a problem, but it's up to them," she answered honestly.

"Oh, of course, of course." The man's enthusiasm was still high.

They passed through the portal and saw the Grangers not too far away. Hermione hurried over to her mother and gave her a hug. Harry was not far behind her, even though he was a little more hesitant. Dan did not let that interfere and grabbed Harry in a one-arm hug.

"It's good to see you, Harry," Dan told him.

"You too, Dad," Harry said, looking very happy now.

The two children switched parents and hugs were again exchanged.

Dan and Emma let go of their children and realized there was a family of redheads nearby, obviously watching them, but back just enough as not to intrude.

Hermione realized what her father was looking at and waved the other family over. "Dad, Mum, this is Mr and Mrs Weasley, along with Percy, Fred, George, Ron, who is in our year, and Ginny."

The father stepped forward. "I'm Arthur," he shook hands with Dan, "and this is my wife Molly."

"Dan and Emma, please."

"Do you have a few minutes?" Arthur asked. "I have a few questions about the non-magical world..."

"I don't see why not."

In the meantime, the women drifted toward each other.

"Molly, I have a few questions about the Wizarding world. Could you help me with those?" Emma asked.

"I'd be delighted, Emma..."

Hermione slowly shook her head and leaned over to whisper in Harry's ear. "I wonder how long it will be before we leave?" Harry shrugged and she noticed something else, so she whispered, "Don't look now, but you have an admirer."

Harry did look around slowly, as if examining the station, and noticed that Ginny was watching him carefully, although she also looked at Hermione a little. He blushed slightly, hoping that the girl's focus of attention would change soon.

By the time the two families split ten minutes later, the kids were all bored, except maybe for Ginny, who seemed to still be interested in Harry, although Hermione thought the girl's expression had changed from adoration to more calculating over their time there. She suspected that Ginny was trying to work out her relationship with Harry.

In the car, everyone got settled for the ride home, which would take roughly forty minutes.

"Well, that was useful," Emma proclaimed with a large smile.

"Oh?" Dan asked. "Arthur seemed like a pleasant person, although I barely got a question in."

Emma lightly laughed. "Molly was very talkative as well, but she answered several of my questions and volunteered to answer any that I might owl her."

"Excellent work, dear. We'll figure this new world out yet," Dan said confidently. He looked in his mirror to the back seat. "Did this term go better than last one?"

"Yes, Dad, thanks to the work you and Mum did on the complaints," Hermione answered.

"I'm glad, honey," her mother answered. "Our meetings with Professor McGonagall also went well." They had met with the Professor for a short meeting once a month to ensure that Severus Snape was behaving himself.

"Yeah, I didn't lose any points or get a single detention from Snape this term," Harry said happily. "I'm sure that not being in his class helped."

"Are you still as happy with Professor Tonks at the end of the term as you were at the beginning?" Emma asked him.

"Yes. She really is good. She was patient with everyone, and didn't let any of the Slytherins bother us either," he said enthusiastically.

"Have you received your grades yet?" Dan asked as he drove.

"We did," Hermione said, almost bursting with happiness. "I got straight Outstandings."

"Excellent," her father told her.

"Congratulations," her mother said. "Harry, how about you?"

"I didn't do quite as well, I got four Outstandings and two Exceeds Expectations."

"That still sounds very good, Harry," Emma said.

"Yes, very good, Harry," Dan praised.

He blushed and looked down, not used to being told such things.

"It was good, Harry," Hermione told him. "I asked Professor McGonagall about class rankings and you're second behind me in Gryffindor, and eighth overall in our year."

The elder Grangers smiled. "Very impressive, Harry. And you, Hermione?"

It was her time to blush and look down. "She said I was first in our year."

"Also impressive. Perhaps we should go out to eat to celebrate?" Dan suggested.

"Will we have time before Professor Dumbledore gets there?" Hermione quickly asked.

"Yes, honey, plenty of time," her mother answered.

They found a small Italian restaurant a little later and had dinner there. The meal time was spent talking about summer plans. They would be gone the last half of July and the first week in August, slowly travelling down the coast of Spain. Hermione liked the idea and Harry was in awe of simply getting to go anywhere.

The Grangers and Harry had barely arrived home when their doorbell

rang. Answering it, Dan Granger found their expected guest was a little early.

"Ah, Mr Granger, it's nice to meet you again."

"Good evening, Mr Dumbledore," Dan said evenly. "Won't you come in?"

"Thank you. I hope you don't mind that I'm a little early, but I have a few things to do later this evening and I hoped we could start a little sooner," he said pleasantly.

"No, no problem at all. From your letter, I understand that you'll need Harry to do this?"

"Yes. I will need a hair from you and your wife to key you both into the wards. I understand that your daughter wants to watch and I can get a hair from her at that time," he explained.

"Certainly ... I'll get Emma."

A few minutes later, all five of them were walking around the property. Dumbledore found five stones from the property, four of which would go to the four corners and the last into the back garden near the house. He then etched a few runes onto each stone with a carving spell; Hermione recognized them all from the book she had borrowed from him. On each of the "corner" stones, Dumbledore cast a spell that connected it to the last stone that would sit in the middle. After the last connection, he buried the corner stones and then cast one last spell on the center stone. There was a brief flash of light, like one sees when a camera flash goes off. When everyone's eyes adjusted again a few seconds later, there was nothing special to be seen, other than an ordinary looking rock, which Dumbledore buried under the ground near a bush.

"What was that?" Hermione asked, blinking furiously.

"That flash was from the control stone accepting an initial charge of magic and passing it to the border stones. From here on, it will draw magic from the earth around it," he told them. "This ward set should hold off people with harmful intent for a few minutes and give you time to escape. It will also warn me should someone try to attack you."

"Thank you, Professor," Hermione quickly said.

"Yes, thank you, Headmaster," Dan agreed.

"You're quite welcome. If you will excuse me, I have another engagement to attend." With one last nod to each of them, he left with a quiet crack.

"That's all there is?" Emma asked.

"Yes, Mum, at least for him," Hermione said quietly.

Emma focused on her child. She knew that tone and look. "What are you thinking?"

"That protection does a little more than he said but we can add to it, with this book to guide us," the girl explained. "Harry and I can put another layer up to make it even safer. We can also add a fire suppression ward to the house, as well as one to increase the structural integrity. There's even one to make sure the roof never leaks."

Dan looked impressed. "Those sound useful. Maybe magic isn't such a bad thing after all."

Emma sighed. "And what about the letter we received about you not being able to do magic outside of school?"

Hermione sheepishly looked down. "Technically, we're not supposed to as the goal is to prevent giving the secret of magic away to those who don't already know; but one of the side-effects of the wards the Headmaster installed is that it blocks the detection of magic. That's why it has an alarm on it. Should someone try to take it down, he'll know and can send help."

Dan and Emma looked at each other and had a silent mental conversation. Eventually, Emma nodded. Dan looked at his daughter. "Very well, but I believe you should limit your work to just the protective magic and where no one else can see you. I believe I can defend that use to whomever asks."

"Thanks Dad! Mum!" She quickly gave them both a hug. "Come on, Harry. We have to plan this." She grabbed his hand and pulled him inside. The adults chuckled at them.

It took two days for Hermione to be completely happy with their choices, but she finally had a list of what she wanted to do and how to do it.

While her parents were in the house, Harry and Hermione found five more stones native to the property and inscribed the needed runes on the stones. She placed them in a shallow hole, but still exposed. Taking hairs she had plucked from all four of them, she dripped a little blood from herself and Harry on the control stone and grabbed Harry's hand to start the ritual to set it up. They went through the ritual in unison, just like Dumbledore had done by himself, and as they finished by powering the runes on the control stone, there was not the brief flash of light like before. This flash of light was so bright it left them blinded.

"Hermione?" Harry asked worriedly.

"I-I'm here, Harry," she answered nervously. "A-are you all right?"

"Apart from not being able to see?" he asked with a nervous chuckle, as if trying to make a joke. It fell flat.

"Yes, apart from that," she said quietly.

"I believe so. We will get our sight back, right?" He pulled off his glasses and rubbed his eyes before blinking rapidly, not that it did any good.

"We should. I mean, we had the light after Dumbledore did it; we just had more this time," she told him, trying to sound like she knew what she was doing, even if it was half guess work and she was more than a little scared.

"So, more light would mean what? It's stronger?" he asked hopefully.

"I can't think of any other answer. Hey, wait!" she said excitedly. "I think I'm starting to regain my sight. It's sort of like being in a very dark room and being used to it, and then someone suddenly turns on a very bright light."

"Err, yeah, I think I'm starting to see spots. I think those are the street lights," he said.

A half minute later, they were able to see fairly normally. "We need to get a book on healing charms so we can make sure we don't have any permanent injuries to our eyes," she suggested.

"Yeah, good idea," he whole-heartedly agreed. "Maybe there's a potion we could brew to repair eyes, assuming it doesn't hurt healthy ones."

"We could..." Hermione paused as an idea dawned on her. "Harry, we should research to see if there is a potion to correct your eyesight,

too. Then you wouldn't need your glasses."

"Not a bad idea, but I'd bet there isn't one."

"Why not?" she thought it was a good idea.

"Because if there was one, then no one in the Wizarding World would wear glasses," he told her.

"Oh, good point. I should have thought of that," she said sheepishly.

"Don't worry about it. I've given the idea of having good eyes a lot more thought than you have. Well, that's done and we can see again," he said. "Let's do the rest of the runes to protect the house itself. We don't want someone standing safely in the street and shooting a Fireball hex at the house and burning it down." He stood and reached down to help her up.

"Right. Let's get started..." she said as she took his hand and stood. Hermione liked learning, but the practical usages of magic were more interesting, or maybe the unexpected ways to make magic do what you wanted was more interesting still, she thought.

(A/N: Did Flamel destroy the real Philosopher's Stone, or was it something else and he plans to go into hiding until Albus is gone? You may decide... :-)

A shorter than normal chapter, but it's where the school year ends. Next up, summer and the beginning of year 2.)

Chapter 5 - Magical Creatures

Dan, Emma, Hermione, and Harry had arrived early and were sitting in the Leaky Cauldron, all drinking a Butterbeer. Emma had objected until she found out it was non-alcoholic, after which all four had liked the drink at first taste.

They had finished their drinks and were simply waiting by the time the Weasley family started coming out of the fireplace. Even though Hermione had explained it, it was still amazing to Dan and Emma to see people come out of a device they thought of as simply supplying heat. Everyone said hello and they entered Diagon Alley to shop for school supplies where, to their surprise, they found the bookstore to be very crowded.

"It's Gilderoy Lockhart," Mrs Weasley said excitedly, "he's actually here!".

Hermione looked at her booklist. It was indeed the name on the banners and the one she had remembered, on all seven books for Defence Against the Dark Arts. Then she saw him at the table and understood why Mrs Weasley was going on about him. He was quite dashing, although she supposed he would be even more handsome to her if she was about twenty years older. Still, he had a certain charm about him that was pleasing to look at. Looking around, she suddenly noticed that it was only women staring at him, including her mother. She blushed, embarrassed at the thought of her and her mother liking the same man with their age difference, and hurried off to find the rest of her books.

Harry was not sure exactly what happened next, but one moment he was walking through the crowded store trying to find the books for his Defence class, and the next moment he had been pulled to the front and was getting his picture taken with Lockhart. Considering how he had been snagged, he hoped the face he had made had been captured on film, as that would serve Lockhart right, even if the man

had given him a free set of books. "Idiot," he muttered darkly, thinking of the pompous man behind him.

Harry flipped through them very quickly and found to his dismay that there were no spell diagrams or real instructions at all. Knowing that Hermione could easily afford her books, he decided he probably did not really need a set of his own; he could look at Hermione's if necessary. Seeing Ginny not too far away, Harry walked over and slid them into her cauldron.

"I don't think I'll need those, so you're welcome to them," he told her.

Ginny blushed shyly. "Thanks, Harry."

"Ah, isn't that cute. Do you have a real girlfriend, Potter, now that your Mudblood has left you? Or did you have to pay the little Weasley to act like one?" drawled a voice Harry would have rather not heard.

"Shut it, Malfoy," Harry said sharply.

"Or what?" Draco asked, suddenly all innocent.

Harry was about to retort when he saw Draco's father looming near. The man, who looked like a much older version of Draco, looked around, making a face as if he had smelled something disgusting. He reached down and pulled a book out of Ginny's cauldron before anyone could stop him. He flipped through the worn and obviously second or even third-hand Transfiguration book with disdain.

"Is this really the best your father could manage for you, little girl?" he started, but was cut off mid-sneer by a voice from behind Harry.

"Lucius." It was said very coldly and it took a second for Harry to realize the voice belonged to Mr Weasley.

"Arthur." That was said just as coldly. "You know, I've always said that

it's far easier to take care of a family properly when one doesn't have more children than one can feed." He hefted the worn book up, as if presenting evidence for his statement.

Harry watched Mr Weasley lunge at Mr Malfoy and a scuffle broke out. Fortunately for everyone, Hagrid was in the store and quickly stopped the two men. Lucius Malfoy gave an affronted look before tossing the worn book back into Ginny's cauldron and stalking off with his son.

"Can you believe that?" someone hissed in Harry's ear. He did not have to look to know who it was.

"That Malfoy's dad is as bad as he is?" Harry asked rhetorically. "Yes, actually -- like father, like son."

"That's not what I meant," Hermione huffed.

"Perhaps not, but it's still true," he returned. Hermione did not have a comeback for that.

Mrs Weasley was beside herself over her husband's actions, whispering comments to him that made the man look very uncomfortable.

Fortunately, the rest of the shopping went by quickly. They all then returned to the Leaky Cauldron before walking into the Muggle world. Dan had parked nearby, as had Arthur. Transferring Harry and Hermione's trunks from the boot of Dan's Mercedes to Arthur's Ford Anglia was quickly accomplished. Mr Weasley caught Harry goggling as the boot swallowed up their trunks, but only winked merrily.

"Ginny, sit in the front with me," Mrs Weasley commanded before giving her boys a stern look, causing them all to stop their playfulness as they waited.

Harry and Hermione gave Dan and Emma a hug before they joined the Weasley boys in the back of the car. Like the boot, the interior was much bigger than the outside suggested. Hermione noticed the odd nervous glances towards Mrs Weasley but nobody made any comment.

On arrival, they pulled up in front of a strange looking house that basic logic suggested should not be standing. It was not that the house was run down, but that the angles and support structure never would have worked in the non-magical world.

"That's cool," Harry said wide-eyed.

"That's magic," Hermione corrected him, no less awed.

"It's our home," Ron said as he shrugged like it was no big deal. "Come on, Harry, you're in with me." He grabbed one end of Harry's trunk and led the way when Harry grabbed the other end. A minute and three flights of stairs later, Harry was in the orangest room he had ever seen. It was also pretty messy.

Dropping his trunk off next to a cot, they went back downstairs, only to be sent back upstairs when Mrs Weasley had them take Hermione's trunk up to Ginny's room. The latter was far girlier than Hermione's, yet also very orderly and clean.

The twins pointed at their door. "That's our room, if you feel like being nosey," one twin said.

"Don't you mean if they feel like being test subjects, brother?" Both twins grinned evilly.

Neither Harry nor Hermione dared to venture in.

"Well, Harry," Ron said, "we have a week left before school starts. Anything special you want to do?"

"Besides fly?" Harry asked with a grin, which Ron matched.

"Have you done all of your summer homework, Ron?" Hermione asked. "You said you'd do it now if it wasn't already done."

"Most of it," Ron answered, although he would not look her in the face when he said it. When she glared at him, he sighed. "OK, I'll finish it this evening, or maybe over the next couple of evenings. But we still have a couple hours before dinner. Come on, Harry!" He grabbed Harry's arm and pulled him along. Harry laughed and ran after him.

Hermione just shook her head. "Boys," she said with exasperation and disbelief.

Ginny giggled. "Ron's almost never serious, especially when it comes to book work. You should have seen Mum trying to teach him to read and write. I think he only learned because I started doing it at the same time."

Hermione smiled. It was the most she had ever heard the girl speak at once. "So you're starting Hogwarts this year, right? Or at least that's what Ron told us."

"Yes, finally," Ginny said, as if she had been denied far longer than she should have been. "It was so boring here last year with just me and Mum at home during the day."

"I could see it as both good and bad," Hermione said diplomatically. "What did you do this summer?"

"Not much," Ginny shrugged. "We hung around and played mostly. What about you?"

"We did our homework first thing so that when we went on holiday to Spain, we wouldn't have to worry about it," Hermione said as if it was the only thing to do. "We had a lot of fun there."

"Sounds like fun," Ginny said wistfully. "Do you do anything special there, or did anything special happen?"

Hermione shook her head. "Not on holiday, but you wouldn't believe what happened when we got back. We had barely arrived home when this mad house-elf came out of nowhere, trying to convince Harry not to return to school."

"Really?"

"Really," Hermione confirmed. "It took almost an hour before we finally convinced him we had to go back, but we'd be very careful. He kept saying that danger was coming and we shouldn't go back."

"What was the danger?" Ginny asked with concern.

"Don't know, he wouldn't say," Hermione told her. "It was all very bizarre."

"Do you want me to show you around the house?" Ginny asked.

"Sure."

They started walking and Ginny pointed out everything on the ground floor of the house before they went outside for a tour there.

As they were walking, Ginny suddenly blurted out, "What's Harry like? Is he nice?"

It was all Hermione could do not to laugh. Between her question and all the looks she had given Harry in previous meetings, it was

obvious she had a crush on Harry. "He is. I think what makes him so nice is that he's just Harry. Do you know what I mean?"

Ginny pondered that for a moment. "You mean he doesn't act all uppity?"

"Absolutely not," Hermione chuckled. "Definitely not uppity. In fact, far from it. He's my best friend." She almost did not admit this, but she felt like she and Ginny were becoming friends, maybe even good friends. "I didn't really have any friends before I came to Hogwarts and, well...he was actually my first friend there." She watched a smile come over Ginny's face, before the calculating look she had seen at the train station at the beginning of the summer came back.

In a timid voice the younger girl asked, "Do you think he'd be my friend, too?"

Hermione almost laughed; this girl had a serious crush. "I think so. I think Harry likes making friends." That seemed to satisfy Ginny as she smiled widely.

They had walked to a nearby field and with a lot more confidence Ginny suddenly said, "This is the paddock." She pointed to her brother and Harry, soaring around. "This is where the family plays Quidditch."

Hermione was suddenly less certain she was going to fit in here. The look on Ginny's face perfectly matched Harry's and Ron's when they talked about Quidditch. Fortunately, Hermione was not accurate in her prediction. They had a lovely time the last week of the summer, except for a few times when the brunette thought Mrs Weasley was a little too invasive and controlling of everyone's lives.

Hermione was not impressed with Mr and Mrs Weasley at the moment. It was ten minutes before eleven and they were rushing through King's Cross to make the Hogwarts Express. Why could they

not have left thirty minutes earlier so they could have taken their time? Of course, getting five minutes away and having to go back three times, making a combined six extra five-minute loops, did show they had tried. Still, this was aggravating to the young witch, who was usually very organized herself.

The Weasleys started going through the portal to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ as fast they could, Mrs Weasley shooing them all through. When all that was left was her, Harry, Ron, and Ginny, Mrs Weasley grabbed Ginny's hand and walked through.

"Come on, hurry up!" Hermione encouraged them and went through the portal herself. Then just because she was curious, she thought hard about Harry and felt for his location. She was not surprised to find that he was not straight through the portal, but off to the right about two hundred or so yards away. The portal was not just a way through a brick wall.

She continued to watch the portal but Harry and Ron still did not come through. She could detect very small movements from Harry, like a step here or there, but he was still basically in the same spot. Getting exasperated with them for having some stupid argument at a time like this, she left her trunk where it was and tried to go back through the portal, only to slam into the wall, slightly scraping her hand. The portal was closed and they were trapped!

Hermione whirled around and ran to the Weasleys, having to do a little hunting, but only for a few seconds. Mrs Weasley was giving Ginny a hug and putting her on the train, oblivious to missing her last son and guest. Her husband was talking to the twins and was just as oblivious to the present crisis.

"Mr Weasley! Mr Weasley! Help! They're stuck!"

The man spun around, his hem of his robes lifting slightly. "What's the problem, Hermione?"

"The portal! It's closed, and Harry and Ron, are stuck, on the other side." She had not run far, but she felt so out of breath.

"Great Merlin!" the man exclaimed. "Fred, George, tell your mother and then get Ginny on the train so you three don't miss it." He quickly made his way back to the portal, rushing past people with a hasty apology thrown over his shoulder as needed. He too found the portal to be solid.

"This shouldn't happen," Hermione heard him say before he pulled his wand and started casting various spells at it.

"Hey now! What are you doing?" came a commanding voice from behind them.

Hermione turned to see a man in deep red robes with the symbol of the Ministry of Magic on his breast come over. He also had his wand out.

Mr Weasley turned. "Wiley? Good, an Auror at the right time."

"Weasley? What are you doing? You can't tamper with the portal," the Auror insisted.

"Wiley, my youngest son and his friend are on the other side. The portal suddenly closed up on its own. I can still detect magic here, but it's like it's suppressed or something. We've got to get it open so they can get on the train," Mr Weasley explained.

The Auror cast a few spells of his own. "Hmm, you're right. Stay here, I'll go check on the boys." The train blew a long whistle and the small group at the portal looked at the train and heard a loud hiss as the brakes were released. "They won't make it now, but we can get them safe and arrange for alternate transportation." He walked over to the designated Apparation point for the train platform and disappeared

with a crack.

"What's going to happen?" Hermione asked Mr Weasley. She was not too concerned at the moment. She could tell Harry was still on the other side of the portal and the Auror was on his way there.

"Don't worry, Hermione," he told her. "We'll find them and then get you to school anyway." He gave a nervous laugh. "You'll probably get there before the others, in fact."

"Harry! It's the only way."

It was all Harry could do not to cuff his friend on the shoulder after several minutes of arguing -- although, maybe if he hit him over the head, it would knock some sense into him. As fun as it might be, he knew Ron's idea was wrong. The voice in his head was telling him that rather loudly, and amusingly enough, the voice sounded just like Hermione, not that that was a bad thing. "And I'm telling you again, no! Hermione is still on Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ and she will get help. We stay right here." He could feel her when he tried. She had moved around a little, but she was basically in the same place. He was not going anywhere without her.

"You're just being a chicken," Ron said accusingly. "Flying the car would get us to school on time."

It sounded so much like Dudley, Harry knew exactly what his friend was trying to do. He would not be goaded into anything. Just to prove his resolution, Harry set his trunk down and sat on it like a bench. "I'm staying here. If you feel like it, you go out to the car park and fly the car to school. Have you even thought about what your parents will think of you if you do that?" He did not know why he had not thought of that argument earlier. One of the things keeping him from taking Ron's suggestion was the thought of how disappointed Dan

and Emma would be with him. "What they'll think when they can't find their own car? Or what they'll say to you when they find out you stole it?"

Ron paled dramatically and slumped down to sit on Harry's trunk beside him. "Mum would be so pissed off I'd get at least a Howler for sure."

"Sounds like a good reason to steal your parents' car," Harry said sarcastically.

Ron shot him a dirty look, but did not respond to the barb. "So why do you think it closed on us?"

Harry had tried coming up with an answer for that, but nothing had presented itself. "Don't know, mate."

A sudden crack startled the two of them, even if it was soft. In front of them was a beefy man in dark red robes. "Well, I'm glad you two had enough sense to stay here."

"Did my dad send you?" Ron asked.

"Yep." The man turned and cast a spell at the portal. "What in the world?" he asked to himself. Without hesitation, he walked forward into the large brick column and disappeared. The two boys gaped and stared after him.

A few seconds later, Mr Weasley came through the portal. His look of great concern changed into a smile when he saw them. "You're safe," were the first words out of him. That was what Harry would have expected Dan to say and what Uncle Vernon never would have. It endeared the man to him.

"I don't know why it temporarily stopped working, but everything seems to be fine now. Wait here and..." He never finished because

his wife came through, followed closely by Hermione with her trunk.

Hermione ran to Harry and engulfed him in a hug, which he enthusiastically returned.

"Harry, what are you doing?" Ron asked when the hug continued.

"Ron, she's family," his mother said. "You'd do the same if Ginny was lost for a spell."

When Harry let go and looked at his friend, Ron did not look like he agreed with his mother. Of course, when Harry thought of Hermione, he was not sure precisely how he felt about her. She was not a sister, and yet...he felt something for her. It was just deep friendship he thought, something he had always craved while he was growing up.

Mr Weasley took matters in hand. "Let's head back to the car, everyone. We'll go home and have some lunch. Afterwards, we'll find a way to get you three to school."

They had spent a relaxing afternoon around The Burrow before Mr Weasley escorted them all through the Floo Network to The Three Broomsticks and led them to the train platform on the eastern edge of town. There, they found Hagrid and the carriages waiting.

"You can put your trunks over there," Hagrid told them after his greeting. "The house-elves will take them with the rest."

"How have you been, Hagrid?" Harry asked.

"Quite good, quite good. Rather restful summer, all quiet like." The big man then looked intently at Harry for a moment before he gave a sound of surprise. "Now I remember! I've got something for yeh,

Harry. I meant to give it to yeh when yeh left last June, but I hadn't finished it yet. Now where is it?" He was digging through the many pockets of his large coat. "Ah! Here it is." He pulled out a book that looked small in his hands, but was not really when Harry was holding it.

Harry opened it and saw a picture of a couple that took up the whole first page. The man was dressed up and looked a lot like him. The woman was in a white dress with dark red hair; she was very pretty. They were both very young, probably only a year or so beyond Hogwarts.

"That's your mum and dad, Harry. It was taken at their wedding. I had a few photos I could find, and then I wrote some of their friends and got some more. I figured yeh didn't have much from them, so I made it for yeh," Hagrid said kindly.

Harry was moved, almost as much as when the Grangers said he could stay with them. With his vision a little blurry, he looked up at the first wizard he had ever met. "Thanks, Hagrid," he said a little roughly.

"No problem, Harry." He slapped Harry's back lightly, even so almost knocking him over.

They all heard a train whistle.

"Ah, here it comes. Yeh lot can grab a carriage whenever you want now, I have to take care of the first years," Hagrid told them.

"My sister is one of them," Ron said.

"Yeh have a sister?" Hagrid seemed surprised.

"Yeah, she's the last of us. No more after her," Ron informed him, as if it was a happy thing.

Hagrid nodded. "I'll take care of her. Don't yeh worry." He turned and walked towards the middle of the platform as the train noisily pulled up.

"Let's go," Hermione said, grabbing their sleeves and pulling them towards the carriages. They were the first in a carriage, but not by much.

The Sorting Feast was a happy occasion, especially for the Weasleys, since Ginny was also added to Gryffindor. Professor McGonagall came by and asked a few questions about the closing of the portal, but she had no answers for them when they asked. The school year was off to a slightly strange start.

The strangeness only grew when Mrs Norris, the caretaker's cat, was mysteriously turned to stone during the Halloween feast. The threatening message painted on a nearby wall about the fabled "Chamber of Secrets" only served to drive the school into temporary hysteria, which faded somewhat when nobody could find any substantial information on the Chamber or its secrets.

Harry was picking at his breakfast. He was only eating anything because Hermione was making him.

"You'll do fine, Harry. You always do," she told him, trying to bolster his courage and his appetite. "I don't know how you do it, but you're the best flyer I know."

He smiled weakly at her and ate some more toast. It probably would not have been so bad except that the Slytherins had been taunting him all week when no professors were around. They had managed to mostly stay within the boundaries of the school rules, but they had put a lot of pressure on him. The worst had been the anonymous

notes left where he would find them.

"It's time. Let's go," said their burly Captain, Oliver Wood, as he led the team out of the Great Hall and towards the Quidditch pitch.

Draco Malfoy was the Slytherin Seeker now, thanks to his father's 'generous donation' of Nimbus 2001 brooms to the Slytherin team. It was going to be a tough game, Harry knew, when the opposing team would all be faster than even himself, the fastest Gryffindor flyer.

They had barely started the game when Harry saw a Bludger come flying towards him. He swerved and it went safely past him. He looked around for the Golden Snitch and turned back just in time to see another Bludger come flying at him from the direction the other had gone. But there were no Beaters in that direction! He swerved again, but this time he kept an eye on the Bludger. To his dismay, he saw it go past him, slow down, and then come back toward him, curving as needed since he was flying.

Harry zoomed back down, curving towards the centre of the field -- the possessed Bludger following him. Just before he had to swerve again, a sharp crack sounded behind him. Turning, he saw one of the Weasley twins watching the Bludger sail towards the Slytherin Chasers.

"Looks like you've got a Bludger problem," Fred yelled.

"Yeah, and it's coming back," Harry yelled back.

The twin smacked the ball towards the Slytherin Chasers again. "Something's wrong. It's not supposed to target only one person." The ball was already slowing down and starting to curve back towards them.

Harry pulled his broom around and zipped down towards the Gryffindor goals.

"What are you doing? Get back up there," Wood shouted at Harry.

"Something's wrong." Harry could say no more as he had to quickly move as the strange Bludger zoomed through the space he had just been in. "That one won't leave me alone and Fred can't guard me forever."

"No kidding," Wood agreed. "Our Chasers are falling behind in points with only George to defend them." As the Bludger came back, Harry moved out of the way and Wood cursed before waving his arms to get Hooch's attention to call a time-out. The score was 60-20 in Slytherin's favour.

As Hooch blew her whistle, Wood and Harry noticed the strange Bludger came to a halt and hovered in mid-field, just like the other Bludger. Wood went to the referee and started arguing his case, waving wildly in the direction of the malfunctioning ball. When he came back to his team, he looked angry.

"She says that since the Bludger was normal at the start of the game, the only way to investigate it is for us to forfeit." He looked at Harry.

"Fine," Harry said with determination. "I'll do something."

"Get the Snitch, too," Wood reminded him.

"He doesn't want much, does he?" Harry muttered.

"You can do it, Harry," Katie Bell told him.

He gave her a weak smile and started to fly back up. As he did so, he saw a very worried face in the front row of the Gryffindor stands. Knowing he had only seconds, he quickly flew over.

"Do you have any ideas how to get this thing off of me?" he asked his

best friend.

Hermione shook her head. "Please be very careful," she told him, near tears.

Ron looked puzzled too, but said nothing.

The whistle blew and Harry flew away so the Bludger would not come over and hit his friends. A glance told him that the rogue Bludger was still after him. He quickly flew up towards Malfoy, who was laughing at his trouble, and went right in front of him. He turned and watched the Bludger follow and almost hit Malfoy in the process. As Malfoy started to curse, Harry got an idea.

Harry turned and zipped downward, angling towards the Slytherin Chasers. He kept far enough in front of them that he could not be called for a penalty, then turned as fast as he could, albeit not as fast as he would have liked, heading behind them. Sure enough, the Bludger tried to cut the corner of Harry's path and flew through the Slytherin Chaser formation, narrowly missing Marcus Flint. Harry smiled and turned a different direction.

He would see a lot of the field flying this way, so perhaps he would find the Snitch first after all. As the Bludger started to catch up again, Harry turned yet again and headed for Malfoy. The other Seeker saw him coming and took off, having learned his lesson from last time. If Harry could not easily get to him, he turned back down and headed for the Slytherin Chasers again. It only took three more times of that before Flint called a time-out.

While the Gryffindor team huddled, they could see Flint arguing with Hooch, also pointing towards one of the Bludgers. Harry had to smile at that.

"You doing OK there, Harry?" Wood asked.

"I'm alive," he answered stoically.

"I might suggest..."

"...that you find that Snitch -- quickly," the twins told him.

"I'm working on it," Harry said a little testily. "When I catch the Snitch, will this thing stop on its own?"

No one had an answer and Madam Hooch blew her whistle to restart the game a few seconds later. Harry growled and flew back up to continue his previous strategy.

On his fourth tour around the pitch, including one that took him and his personal Bludger near enough to the Slytherin Keeper that he had to duck for cover, which happened to be about the same time Angelina Johnson flew by with the Quaffle and made an easy goal, Harry saw the Snitch. Continuing his crazy flying, so Malfoy would not think anything out of the ordinary -- at least for this game -- was happening, he zigged and zagged towards the Snitch. As he neared it, it tried to jump up, but Harry's hand shot out and captured it.

He held his hand up to show the catch and angled down to the ground only a few feet below him. Unfortunately, just as he was about to touch down, the possessed Bludger came by and hit his arm. Harry howled at the unexpected pain and dropped to the ground, cradling his arm which felt broken. He looked up to the sky as he lay on his back just in time to see the crazy Bludger coming down fast, straight for him. Ignoring the pain in his arm, he quickly rolled to the side. The Bludger buried itself in the ground right where he had been lying and a large foot stepped on it. Looking up, Harry saw Oliver Wood standing next to him, his leg jiggling slightly as the Bludger tried to fly out of the hole, but the big Keeper stood firm.

The next person to get there was none other than his Defence teacher, closely followed by the rest of his team. Harry did not know

how Lockhart had made it there so quickly.

"Here, let me help you, Mr Potter. I'll have it fixed in a trice." The professor pulled out his wand.

"I think I'd rather Madam Pomfrey do it," he quickly said, suddenly scared at what this teacher who taught so little might do.

"It's no problem at all, Mr Potter." Then without an incantation, the man waved his wand and touched the tip of his wand to Harry's broken arm.

Harry felt warmth throughout his arm, which felt very odd when the wand was removed. When he looked, he noticed that his arm was bending all on its own, in rather more places than usual. He heard a gasp behind the teacher. Looking up, he saw Hermione wide-eyed and angry; as angry, in fact, as he had ever seen her.

"You ... you ..." Hermione struggled to speak. "You removed the bones in his arm, you, you ..." George prevented her from finishing her tirade by covering her mouth with his hand and picking her up to get her away.

"Well, it's not, uh, broken anymore, is it?" Lockhart finished lamely. He quickly stood up and briskly said, "I'm all done here, time to move on," as he hurriedly walked away under the angry glare of Hermione, who was still struggling and now required both twins to keep her under control.

Madam Pomfrey was now able to get to him and after a quick look she shook her head. "Fixing a broken bone is easy; re-growing one is much harder, let alone two."

"I tried to stop him," Harry protested.

"I'm sure you did, Mr Potter. Well, come along with me. You'll be

spending the night in my wing," the nurse told him in semi-comforting tones.

Harry carefully stood. "Just a minute," he told her before hurrying over to Hermione, who was not struggling so hard now that he was standing. As he approached, the twins let her go and she rushed the last few steps between them and engulfed him in a hug.

Now that she was holding him, she let the tears of frustration and love flow. She wanted to hold him until he was better, but she also wanted to pull her wand and go show that Lockhart a thing or two. If he could not even do a simple bone repairing spell, she now doubted he could do anything right. She had been so blinded by him before. He was a menace.

As Harry stood there with his good arm around Hermione, gently patting her back, he looked over her shoulder and through her bushy hair he saw Ginny watching him with a concerned look. He gave her a weak smile and then let go of Hermione. She got the message and dropped her arms. He turned and started walking after Madam Pomfrey. Hermione went with them, walking right beside him.

In the hospital wing, Madam Pomfrey gave him something called "Skele-Gro". It was very strange to have no bones but still feel like there was something there, and it tingled something fierce. Fortunately Madam Pomfrey let Hermione stay until dinner, which was in an hour.

"Harry, why do you think there was a rogue Bludger after you?" Hermione asked hesitantly, as if afraid of what she might hear.

"I don't know. I know that some people take Quidditch very seriously, but I can't imagine anyone trying to kill me over it," he replied, trying to keep his mind on the conversation instead of his arm.

When she did not immediately say anything else, he looked over at her and saw that she was looking carefully at her hands and biting her lip, worrying over something.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I found something else out today." She paused and then looked up at him and whispered so softly he could barely hear her, "About us."

"What?" he softly asked.

She leaned closer until her lips were only inches from his ear as he sat in bed. "You know how we can feel where the other person is and ... well ... whether they're all right?"

He nodded.

"I know now what it's like when you're not all right."

Harry whipped his head around to stare at her, practically nose to nose.

"When you broke your arm, I didn't feel like mine broke or anything, but I knew you were hurt. I knew you were not all right." She lowered her head past his chin and rested her forehead on his shoulder, as if trying to draw comfort from him.

"And you haven't really been hurt yet for me to know that," he spoke his thought out loud. They just stayed that way with each other for the rest of the time until Madam Pomfrey sent Hermione to dinner.

The tingling in his arm was almost done, but it was enough to keep Harry awake, even though it must be near curfew, he guessed. Harry was still trying to ignore his arm, without much success, when there

was a quiet pop near the foot of his bed. Part of him was not surprised to see the crazy house-elf that had visited him over the summer.

"Dobby, what are you doing here?" he asked as he sat up to see better. Thankfully, he still had his glasses on.

The elf wrung his hands. "Dobby come to apologize for hurting the great Harry Potter, but Dobby do what he has to do."

It took a moment for Harry to follow that logic, but then it suddenly made sense. "Wait! You're saying you're the one that changed the magic on the Bludger and sent it after me?"

Dobby looked very sad and repentant, but he slowly nodded. "Dobby is very, very sorry. He tried twice before to get the Great Harry Potter to stay away from school, but you would not stay away."

"Twice?" He thought furiously. The first time was obviously in the summer when the elf tried to tell him that had to stay away, and Hermione used some strange logic to prove he would be safer at school, mostly because of Dumbledore. But when was the second time? Then he knew... "You're also the one that closed the portal to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ on me, aren't you?"

Dobby's ears flapped as he nodded using his whole body. "You should have stayed home when you missed the train."

Harry could not decide whether to be angry at the elf or not. There was a good chance he was deranged, and so not totally responsible for his actions. "Do you realize that you almost got me killed today?" Harry finally asked. "Especially at the end. If the Bludger had hit me when I was lying on the ground, I'd be dead now."

The elf seemed to shake violently for a moment and almost seemed to want to cry. "Dobby is very sorry. He will go shut his head in the

oven now." Before Harry could say anything else, the elf left with a pop, presumably to go do as he had just said.

Harry took off his glasses, laid them on the nightstand, and snuggled down into his bed again. Why do these things have to happen to me, he asked himself. Unfortunately, he received no answer.

Harry was not quite asleep when he heard adult voices outside the doors to the hospital wing. He faked sleep as they came in.

"I don't know what he was doing out at this time of night." It was Professor McGonagall.

"We can only speculate and that probably won't help." That was Dumbledore. "Hmm, he had his camera in front of his face. Let's see if we can get a clue here."

A camera? Well, that narrowed the possibilities down to one, Harry thought.

There was a hissing sound and a gasp from McGonagall. The stench of burning plastic reached Harry's nose.

"Apparently, we won't find a clue there," Dumbledore said. "I've never seen film do that before."

"I'll have to write a letter to his parents. It's a shame that Pomona won't have the Mandrakes ready before near the end of the year. That will put him over half a year behind his peers." McGonagall did sound like she was sorry for the boy.

"It can't be helped; they won't mature any faster. We'll have to provide him some tutors over the summer to help him catch up to his year mates. Hmm, I wonder..." but Dumbledore did not say what he

was thinking about.

"I wonder what happened to him," McGonagall said.

"A valid question, but I believe the answer is contained in the Chamber of Secrets. I also believe the more important question to be 'how.' How did it get opened?" Dumbledore paused. "Let us take our leave as there is nothing more we can do here. You have a letter to write and I must figure out a way to keep the board of governors happy while we try to solve the mystery."

When they had left, Harry got his glasses and looked across the room. There lay a very stiff Colin Creevey. He wondered how this was connected to the petrification of Mrs Norris and the message left on the wall. He also wondered what Hermione would think of this when he told her.

He now had another reason for it to be difficult to go to sleep that night.

Emma gave a hug to Harry and then to her daughter. She was thrilled to see that Harry now looked to them like real parents. She knew deep down that he knew the difference, but she was still very happy to see him respond to them with love and respect. The four went to their car so they could drive to their home to do a little packing before their trip. Dan had planned for them to spend their Yule holiday in Ireland, where there also just happened to be a reputable school of magic nearby. They had become increasingly concerned from their daughter's letters. Harry's addition to the bottom of one about that strange house-elf showing up again had not helped.

When they were all in the car and the kids were a captive audience, Emma turned in her seat to see them. "So, how was your term?" The fact that Harry looked to Hermione, as if checking how to answer, did not fill her with good thoughts.

"A lot of it was good, Mum. Most of our classes are going well. History is no better than it was, but we study our book carefully. Potions is still great; Professor Tonks is one of the best teachers we have." Hermione paused.

"I sense a 'but' there," her mother prompted when silence stretched out.

"You know Professor Lockhart, the wizard at the bookstore that grabbed Harry and had a picture taken with him?"

Emma laughed and Dan chuckled. "Yes. I really enjoyed the face Harry was making when that picture was snapped." The picture in the Daily Prophet had shown Harry with a look of horror, as if the obnoxious man was a creature to be feared and avoided.

"Well, we've found out that he's not really all that good," Hermione said.

"Wait a minute," Emma said, thinking back. "Wasn't he the one that accidentally removed the bones in Harry's arm?"

"Yes, that's the one. That's also when I realized he's not as good as his books make him out to be," Hermione sheepishly admitted.

Emma gave her daughter a smile. "It's all right, honey. I'm glad that you learned that pretty faces can hide an ugly person without really getting hurt."

Hermione nodded. She understood what her mother was telling her, but it did not make the lesson any easier to learn.

"Have you had any problems with Professor Snape?" Emma asked.

"No," Harry answered, to give Hermione a break. "Other than a few

sneers when he passed us in the corridors, he's ignored us and we've ignored him. Like a couple of weeks ago, there was a Duelling Club that we went to, but as soon as we saw Professor Snape there, Hermione convinced me to leave. So the strategy of ignoring him has worked out pretty well. The Slytherins have been giving me a hard time about a few things, like before our Quidditch match with them, but I've been able to handle it."

"Good for you, Harry," Dan praised him.

Harry beamed at the praise.

"Did anything else special happen?" Emma asked.

"Not really," Harry answered, looking at Hermione as they purposefully left out the news about Justin being petrified a few days ago. "Ron's still a prat at times, but he's getting better and Neville is becoming a better friend." Hermione nodded her agreement.

Emma stole a look at Dan, who glanced back and nodded slightly.

"We were planning to go to Ireland for a week. How does that sound to you two?" Emma asked.

"Another trip?" Harry asked excitedly.

"Will it be near the magic school there?" Hermione asked at almost the same time.

Both parents chuckled. "Yes, and yes," Dan answered, receiving two shouts of joy and big grins from the back seat.

Everyone had enjoyed the trip to Ireland. Unfortunately, the visit to the magic school there did not meet their full expectations. It was a

much smaller school and had fewer electives available. It also had a much smaller library, disappointing Hermione greatly. When the four had discussed it later, they decided that the Irish school was not for them. As much as they had enjoyed Ireland, Emma was pleased with that, as she wanted to go visit the school in France. They tentatively planned for that to happen during the summer.

Harry had just finished Potions for the day. He had barely made it out of the classroom when a burly little dwarf went rushing by seeking out someone. Harry just shook his head and was glad the dwarf was not after him. Sure it was Valentine's Day, but he could not figure out what had possessed Lockhart to do such a stupid thing as to bring in dwarves for singing valentines.

Dismissing the matter and continuing his walk to his next class, he returned to his thoughts on the little diary that he had found yesterday on the second floor, near where Mrs Norris had been found petrified. It was a very strange book, in that it had no writing in it, but the date on the inside cover was from fifty years ago. He would have to spend more time looking at it tonight.

He was thinking about showing the book to Hermione and Ron to see what they made of it when he was suddenly pushed up against the wall by a rather scruffy grim-looking dwarf.

"Harry Potter, I've found you."

Harry looked around for a way of escape, but saw none. Hermione, Ron, and a few of his other classmates from Potions were there, as were a number of first years coming to Potions, including Ginny Weasley.

"I've got a musical message for you," the dwarf told him. He plucked a note on a small harp hanging by his side to get the pitch.

"But..."

"Stay here," the dwarf ordered him and pushed him harder against the wall. He plucked the note once more with his free hand, then began to sing in a gruff bass voice.

"His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,
His hair is as dark as a blackboard.
I wish he was mine, he's really divine,
The hero who conquered the Dark Lord."
(quoted from "CoS" by JKR)

Harry looked at Hermione who in turn looked embarrassed for him, causing him to mentally cringe and want to disappear. He even tried to chuckle like everyone else, but he could not make a sound. He just opened his mouth and looked like he was chuckling.

A loud and cruel laugh sounded and grabbed everyone's attention. "Ah, you've got a girlfriend Potter," drawled Draco Malfoy, looking around. Spotting someone who seemed to be trying to get away from the scene, he took advantage. "Look Potter, your girlfriend is running away she's so embarrassed of you." He pointed to Ginny Weasley, who was indeed trying to sneak between people to make her way into the Potions classroom.

Malfoy did not get to say anything else as Percy Weasley showed up suddenly.

"What's going on here?" the Gryffindor prefect asked, but he did not wait for an answer. "Everyone hurry onto class or I'll start taking off points. Go on," he said, making shooing motions with his hands.

Just before Malfoy left, he smirked smugly at Harry and called out towards Ginny, "Too bad, little Weasel, I don't think he liked your Valentine very much." He laughed as he walked off with his friends. Ginny hid her face and practically ran the last few yards to class. Ron pulled out his wand to hex the Slytherin, despite the fact that his

brother the Prefect was standing right there, but there were too many people in the corridor and Malfoy got away.

Harry cringed inside and turned red before hurrying off towards Charms.

"Ignore it, Harry," Hermione's voice told him.

He slowed down a little so she could keep up with him. "Do you know who sent that?"

"No," she told him. "I could guess, but I might be wrong. I have seen several girls looking at you today," she explained.

"Great, just great," he complained as they went up the stairs, trying to make it to Charms before they were late.

That evening, after Harry was finished with all of his homework, he sat down with the little black diary. As he looked it over, Hermione spotted it.

"Planning on starting a journal?" she asked.

Harry shook his head. "No, I just found it. It seems to be blank." There was something about it that held his attention and made him want to do something to it, but he was not sure what.

Hermione shrugged. "I'm going to bed. I've been staying up too late the last few nights. Don't you stay up too late."

"I won't," he replied. "I'll go to bed in a few minutes."

"OK, good night," she told him and left him alone at the table they had been using; Ron had left half an hour earlier.

Harry was still puzzling over the diary when Ginny came walking by. He looked at her and noticed that she looked very pale, and almost terrified, as she saw him sitting there. Without a word, she rushed on, heading for the stairs and her room. He shrugged and returned to looking at the diary.

Not being able to figure anything else out, other than the name and date on it, Harry picked up a quill and tried to write an entry in it. Tried being the operative word, as his writing was absorbed and disappeared into the page. To his surprise, a few seconds later, new writing appeared on the page, and it was intelligent -- it responded to exactly what he wrote.

He started writing to it and before he knew what was happening, it offered to show him a memory from fifty years ago. It was like he was sucked into the book, and the experience was a little unsettling. Even more disturbing was that the memory he had seen made Hagrid out to be the reason the Chamber of Secrets was opened and a student was killed. That did not seem like the Hagrid he knew. People could change, but that seemed like an awfully big change for someone who looked at life as simply as Hagrid did.

For the moment, he closed the little book and dropped it into his book bag. He would have to talk to Hermione about this. Several things did not quite add up, but he could not figure out where the inconsistencies were. If anyone could figure the mystery out, Hermione could, he knew. Being tired, he headed up to bed, hoping he remembered to tell her about this tomorrow.

It was early May and Harry was rummaging through his book bag. He suddenly remembered the little black diary he had found back before Valentine's Day. He searched for it, to see if he could find any more

clues about it. Frustratingly, he could not find it in his bag anywhere, even after searching for it three times. He had to conclude he had lost it somewhere, but where?

He had also forgotten to talk to Hermione about it, and thought that maybe he should have that conversation tomorrow.

Harry and Hermione sat down at a table in the Gryffindor common room, each spreading their things out. Since it was a Saturday afternoon, Ron had refused to join them. Most of the others in their house were out playing as well, but Harry was staying with his best friend. He was caught up on homework, so he used the time to look at spells for the next year. He ignored most of the theory and concentrated on useful spells, like the unlocking spell.

Hermione was looking at several overview books, trying to determine what extra classes they might take next year.

Harry turned the page in his book and saw a duplication spell to copy the words on one piece of parchment onto another. That reminded him of the diary.

"I found a really interesting book a couple of months ago," Harry started.

Hermione looked up from her book. "And you're just now telling me?" she asked.

It took a moment, but Harry finally detected a slight teasing look on her face. "Yeah, well, it was around Valentine's and I sort of got distracted that day."

"I suppose," she allowed, a smile now slipping out. "What did you find?"

"It looked a lot like a diary and had a person's name on it, a 'T.M.

Riddle'. It also had a date on it -- 1945 -- otherwise it was blank."

She looked at him. "You found a somewhat old but blank diary. So?"

He ran his fingers through his hair on the side. "Well, the really weird part is that it wrote back to me."

The playful manner in Hermione was dropped. "It did what?" She stared at him as if urging a useful answer out of him.

"When I wrote in it, the ink was absorbed and then a few seconds later, it wrote back. And the really weird part was that not only did it make sense, like it was a person, but it also had memories," he said.

Hermione looked puzzled. "What do you mean 'memories'?"

"I asked it about the Chamber of Secrets, since it was from about that time, and it sort of pulled me into a memory to show me what had happened. It was really weird, I experienced everything as if I was right there in that time. But some things about it didn't make sense."

Hermione was looking excited. "Very strange. It really makes you wonder where the limits of magic really are." He nodded. "So, what did it show you and what didn't make sense?"

"Well, it's a little fuzzy now, since it's been a while, but it showed me a conversation between a boy and Professor Dippet and then a younger Professor Dumbledore. They talked about a student who had been killed in relation to the Chamber of Secrets and Dippet said the school might have to close. Then this boy went to another part of the castle and found Hagrid, who was huge even when he was young, with a spider the size of his head. The boy said the spider was the monster killing people, and that Hagrid was responsible."

"Interesting. I wonder if we can ask Hagrid about this?" She thought for a moment before she looked at him again. "So, what didn't make

sense to you?"

"Well, I know people can change over time, but I don't think Hagrid would have done anything like that. It just doesn't seem like him."

Hermione nodded. "I agree. On the other hand, he does seem to like big and dangerous creatures. Maybe it was an accident?"

"Yeah, maybe," Harry reluctantly conceded. He shrugged. "It also seemed like this boy knew more than he was saying." His eyes went a little wider. "Wait. What kind of spider can petrify people?"

Hermione grinned. "Good question. We can research that. Or ... let's go talk to Hagrid. I bet he's at his cabin."

Harry matched her grin. "Yeah, I bet he would know. Let's go."

They hurriedly put their things in their dorm rooms and then went down to visit Hagrid together.

Hagrid answered the door when they knocked. "Harry, Hermione, fancy seein' yeh here. Come in, come in. I haven't seen yeh in a while." He closed the door behind them and led them to his table, which had the only chairs for them to sit in. "How's school for yeh?"

"It's been good, especially since no one's been petrified lately," Hermione answered.

"True," the big man absently agreed.

"Hagrid?" Harry got his attention. "You know a lot about magical creatures. Is it possible for a spider to petrify someone?"

"No, I don't know of any spider who could do that. Some can kill a person. Some could maybe paralyze yeh for a while, but not petrify," he explained.

"Not even a really big spider?" Harry asked. He had to make sure.

"You mean something like Aragog?"

"What's an Aragog?" Hermione asked. She wondered how many magical creatures there were.

"Aragog's not a what, but a who. I raised him since he was very young. He lives in the forest now. I visit him from time to time." Hagrid had a smile on his face, obviously reliving a happy memory.

Harry looked at Hermione as he realized that memory he saw was probably true, at least a little. "What species is Aragog?" he asked.

"Oh, he's an Acromantula. He's a bit bigger than a stallion and can talk. He's getting pretty old now," the man said sadly.

Hermione thought this was a dead-end, but she would look Acromantula up in the library later anyway. "Hagrid? Are there any animals that can petrify people? I mean, everyone seems to think a person is doing this, but what if it's an animal?"

Hagrid scratched his head. "That's an interesting idea, Hermione. Yeh should probably ask Dumbledore that." He then mumbled, "Good man, Dumbledore."

"I can," she said, "but I'd like to know what you think. You seem to know a lot about animals."

The big man beamed through his bushy beard. "Well, there are a few things. A gorgon could do that, but this is really the wrong sort of place for a gorgon." He scratched his head again. "I think there's one more, but I can't rightly recall."

"Thanks, Hagrid, that's a big help," Hermione said exuberantly.

They talked for a little while longer before the two left. As they walked back into the castle, they met Oliver Wood and the rest of the Quidditch team walking out.

"There you are, Harry," Oliver called out to him. "Get your broom. I've called an extra practice to get ready for our last game in three weeks."

Hermione felt put out and almost grumbled that Wood could not have him because she wanted Harry to help her research, but she supposed it would not really hurt as she could search by herself. "Go on, Harry. Come and find me in the library when you're done."

"You sure?" he asked.

"I'll be fine. That's your way of relaxing; I relax in the library. Go on," she encouraged him.

He grinned. "Thanks!" He turned and followed the team out. His broom was locked up in the practice shed and he could practice in his normal clothes.

Hermione shook her head and walked into the castle. Why had they not thought about a magical beast before, she asked herself.

Harry was finished with practice and had just put his broom away when something felt very wrong in his head. For a brief second, everything about Hermione was entirely wrong. He knew she was hurting everywhere at once. His hands flew to his head and he fell to his knees. Then it was gone -- all gone. It was like his connection to Hermione had been ripped from him. He never realized what their bond meant to him until it was gone. It was like the warm security blanket of his mind was gone. He screamed and fell over on his left

side. Still holding his head, he curled up into a foetal ball, holding his head, and hoarsely moaning.

There were voices calling his name and hands on him, but he paid no attention. His mind was searching for Hermione and he found nothing. There was no feeling if she was well or hurt, no location, nothing.

"Hermione," he panted and started to uncurl now that the shock of the moment was gone. "Hermione!" He struggled to get up.

"Harry! What's wrong?!"

He finally realized that Katie Bell was shouting at him. He looked at her trying to figure out what he should say. Considering how he felt, he imagined he must look deranged.

"There's something wrong with Hermione; I know it," he managed to get out. It sounded a little thin to him, but maybe he was imagining that.

"How?" Angelina asked. "Did you have a vision or something?"

His head seemed to jerk around to look at her on its own accord. "Yeah," he agreed, latching onto the first idea that came along. "I have to go find her." He tried to scramble to get up, but it was hard. He stumbled like he had no balance.

Fred and George grabbed an arm each and steadied him. "We'll go with you, Harry," one of them said.

"If something happened, then we should try the hospital wing first," the other twin suggested.

"Yeah, good idea," he said. He started to walk, but moved like he was drunk, weaving constantly from side to side. He would have fallen if

not for the Weasley twins. They steadied him and guided him towards the castle. Harry concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, and he was walking reasonably well by the time they got to the front doors, although he stumbled a little on the stairs. The twins stayed with him the whole way nonetheless.

At the entrance to the hospital wing, they met a very distraught looking Gryffindor coming out. "Misters Weasley and Potter. What are you doing here?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"Hermione," Harry said and tried to go forward, but the twins were too strong and held him fast.

McGonagall sighed deeply and a look of concern came over her, a look the students rarely saw. "Mr Potter, there's been an accident," she gently said and put a hand on top of his shoulder. "Your friend, Miss Granger, has been petrified."

"No!" he yelled and with a burst of strength broke free of the twins, rushed past the professor, and pushed through the doors, disappearing inside.

"My word!" She turned to the twins. "What happened to him?"

They shrugged as one. "We don't know. We had just finished practice when he fell, then he started screaming her name and holding his head."

"He said he had a vision about her being hurt, so we brought him here. Maybe he should be looked at too."

McGonagall turned around and went back into the infirmary. She stopped so fast the twins almost ran into her. Across the room, the school nurse was trying to pull a very distressed Potter from the stone-stiff Miss Granger. The boy was crying and holding on to the girl for dear life. She hurried over to help.

"Minerva, help me," Pomfrey begged when she saw her friend.

"Poppy, let go and let me talk to him," McGonagall said as she put a hand on Pomfrey's arm to stop her. After a few seconds, Pomfrey nodded and slowly let go of the boy, who moved a little closer to the girl, trying to hug her as tightly as possible, despite her being in such an awkward position.

McGonagall pulled her wand and conjured two chairs, one behind him and the other next to it. She then sat down on the edge of the bed and lightly rubbed his back. "Mr Potter," she gently said.

His crying was not as loud; it was mostly sniffles and ragged breathing now.

Perhaps this was unusual enough, she thought. "Harry," she called to him. He turned his head a little, but still was mostly looking at Hermione. "Harry, I know she's your friend..."

"My best and only true friend," he said a little belligerently before he lowered his head a little and rested it on Hermione's head.

If they had been two years older, Minerva would have wondered if there was more than friendship. She kept rubbing his back. "Harry," she tried again. "I know she's your best friend, but she will be cured and back to normal soon."

"How soon?" he demanded.

Normally, she would have chastised a student for that attitude, but this was not a normal situation. "Professor Sprout says the Mandrakes can be harvested in about two weeks, maybe a little more. Then Professor Snape will brew the potion, which will take a few days. She should be back to normal in less than three weeks."

Harry slowly sat up and turned to look at her. Wide tear streaks covered each cheek and his lower lip quivered, which matched his voice. "Promise?"

Minerva almost lost it. Such innocence, despair, and hope all mixed together in his face. Her hand left his back and came up to his head and caressed it for a moment. "If it's not by then for some reason we don't know of, then I promise it will be very, very soon thereafter." Her hand slowly pulled his head towards her and although his body protested for a second, it soon gave up and he all but flew to her. She hugged him for all she was worth. This was James's boy and she would take care of him.

Finally, she loosened her grip and let him sit up on his own. "Why don't you sit in this chair behind you, and then you can comfortably stay here with her for awhile."

"Really?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes, you may. You'll have to obey Madam Pomfrey, but you can stay here when you have free time, if you want."

"Thank you," he whispered.

She gave him a tender smile. "Now, please tell me what happened to you. I was told you knew something happened to your best friend."

Harry looked down and over at his friend. "I don't know how to explain it," he said slowly, desperately trying to figure how what to say without giving away the secret of their bond. Perhaps Angelina's idea was still the best. "It was like I knew something happened to her. I got a flash or something of her falling and then not moving. It was so brief, but I felt ... I knew something was wrong and it hurt to know that my only real friend was hurt." The emotion of the moment hit him again and new tears silently made their way down his face.

McGonagall conjured a handkerchief and handed it to him, which he took and used. She had never had an insight or vision like that, so she was unsure of what to say. She did not think either of his parents ever had such an event either, so she was uncertain where this talent had come from. When she saw his scar, she wondered for a moment if maybe that experience had generated more of an effect than anyone knew.

"Harry, you can sit here until dinner and then you need to come down and eat. I need to do one thing before dinner, but I expect to see you there. You must maintain your strength," she told him.

He vaguely nodded, still staring at his friend.

She patted him on the shoulder and got up. McGonagall was surprised to see the Weasley twins still here, standing quietly and respectfully. She walked over for a quiet word. "If you would, please return later to ensure Mr Potter makes it to dinner. He must eat, too."

"We will," the one she thought was George said. She also realized this was the first time in her memory of them that they did not use twin-speak.

"Thank you," she told them and left for the Headmaster's office.

When she arrived, she found the Headmaster there and looking worried. "Albus?"

"Minerva," he said quietly. They had already discussed the petrification of Miss Granger and Miss Clearwater when it happened. Potter had barely missed seeing the Headmaster in the infirmary.

"I will return shortly," she told him. "I must inform the Grangers of this, per our agreement."

He nodded. "And I must inform the Board of Governors. I fear they

will request we close the school and I can not help but wonder if we wouldn't be wise to do so. Perhaps I can convince them to allow it to stay open since the Mandrakes will be ready soon."

"It is a difficult decision," she solemnly agreed before heading for the fireplace. She took the Floo network to the Leaky Cauldron and then Apparated to the Granger house. She was not looking forward to this.

Mr Granger answered her knock. "Professor McGonagall," he greeted her with a very surprised expression. "Since we met last week, to what do we owe this unexpected visit?"

"May I please speak with you and your wife? I need to explain something to you," she said vaguely.

"Of course," he said and let her in. "Please have a seat in our living room while I go and fetch Emma."

McGonagall took a seat. She knew she had not been interrogated at the door because of the respect they had developed through their regular meetings. Still, this would be difficult.

"Is there something wrong?" Emma asked as she entered the room.

McGonagall tried to keep her expression neutral, but something must have given her away.

"Oh my god, something happened. What?" Emma demanded, although the question was almost lost as it came out in a hoarse squeak.

Her husband guided her over to the couch and made her sit, for which Minerva was very thankful.

"Hermione will be fine soon, but she was in an accident this

afternoon," she steadily said.

"Was she another victim of whatever got that other student?" Dan asked. Emma did not look to be capable of speaking at the moment.

"I'm afraid that I must answer yes. We still don't know what happened, but we believe your daughter knows something as she was using a mirror to walk at the time of the accident, which is very usual, even in the Wizarding World," McGonagall admitted.

"You said she will be fine? Are you sure and when?"

"Yes, we're quite sure she will fully recover. The most important ingredient in the potion that will revive her will be harvested in about two weeks and administered a few days later after it is prepared," she assured them as confidently as she could. "In the meantime, students will not be allowed in the corridors alone without a teacher present, so Mr Potter should continue to be safe."

Both parents breathed a sigh of relief. "At least he's safe," Emma whispered.

"I know it is pointless for me to ask you not to worry, but she will be fine in a few weeks and we will keep careful watch over Mr Potter in the meantime. I'm afraid that's all I have to tell you, but if you have any other questions later, you're welcome to owl me," she told them.

Emma looked at her husband. "Dan, I've had enough. I want them out of there."

Her husband hugged her briefly before looking back at McGonagall. "Professor, we appreciate you coming to tell us yourself and for your efforts to protect Harry, but we believe our children are finished with Hogwarts."

"Mr and Mrs Granger..."

"Professor McGonagall," Dan interrupted her. "Despite your efforts, one of our children has received a major injury and you didn't know why it happened before. Do you know what is doing this now?" he asked pointedly.

"No," McGonagall said quietly, ashamed to have to admit that.

"Then I believe that our children need to come home."

"Mr and Mrs Granger. Hermione will be revived in two or three weeks, and in the meantime, she can not be injured further. I will do my personal best to ensure that your son will not be injured in the same manner. He indicated that he wanted to spend most of his free time in the hospital wing with Miss Granger, and that is a very safe place. The term finishes in about six weeks. At least let them finish the term," the professor appealed to them. She did understand their concerns. A few Muggle-born students had been withdrawn during her tenure as a teacher.

The Grangers looked at each other. "Perhaps until Hermione is made well?" Dan suggested. Emma considered it and nodded after a moment. "Harry may stay until Hermione is recovered and then we'll make our decision," Dan told her.

McGonagall smiled slightly. That would give them some time to solve the mystery and maybe allow the two students to stay at school for the rest of the term. "Thank you. I'm sure Mr Potter will appreciate that and I will look after him. I also promise that I will come visit again when your daughter is revived."

"Thank you for coming to inform us," Dan told her. "Please keep our son safe."

McGonagall nodded and stood. "I will. May I leave from here?" she asked. Dan nodded and she Apparated back to the Leaky Cauldron.

Emma let her emotions go and started crying hard while Dan held her. He was breathing deeply and very controlled.

"We are going to France this summer," she finally said when she could talk again.

"I think it's a wonderful idea," he told her, his voice unnaturally steady in his controlled anger.

(A/N: Action is coming... :)

Chapter 6 - Diaries Can Be Hazardous

Harry sat in the infirmary beside Hermione all decked out in his Quidditch robes. The last game of the year for Gryffindor was due to start soon, but he was here by her side as he had been in almost all of his free time over the last three weeks.

McGonagall had said he could see his friend as much as he wanted and she was in charge now; Dumbledore had been dismissed by the Board of Governors after Hermione and Penny Clearwater had been petrified. Harry had also noticed that his Head of House was usually the one to escort him or whatever group he was in when he went outside of the Gryffindor Tower. He was actually very appreciative of that, as it made him feel safer.

Even better, Madam Pomfrey had told him this morning that the restoration potion was in the final preparation stage, and would be ready tomorrow. Harry was more than ready for Hermione to come back.

He reached up and caressed her hard arm for a moment. He had done that a few times, but normally did not. It seemed too invasive, too personal, and yet he really missed her words of encouragement before events like this. As he touched her hand, he suddenly felt something that was not hard. Perplexed, he stood up and twisted his head around to an angle he normally did not and looked. There appeared to a piece of parchment in the hand that had not held the mirror. He carefully worked it out of her fist.

As he unrolled it and smoothed it out, he saw that it was part of a page that had been torn from an old library book. That brought a smile to his face that had been so sad for the last three weeks. He would have to tease her about the sacrilege of abusing a library book. He looked at it carefully and read.

Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there

is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size, and live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it.

(quoted from CoS by JKR)

Below that and written in her own handwriting was one word: pipes.

So Hermione thought there was a Basilisk in the school and it was the reason for everyone being petrified? But the text did not mention petrification, only death. He pondered that. Wait! He thought. Hermione had been using a mirror. Colin had been holding his camera. When Justin had been brought in, they had also brought in a petrified Sir Nick. He did not know what had saved Mrs Norris, but it seemed as though if you did not look directly at the monster, then you were only 'partially dead' or petrified. He looked back at the bottom of the paper. And it seemed as though Hermione thought the snake travelled through the pipes of the school. It was a bit of a stretch, but it made sense in its own way he concluded.

Harry reached out and stroked the girl's hard hair. "You really are brilliant," he told her reverently.

The noise of the door opening caused him to jerk his hand back and blush at having been caught touching his friend. He saw the three team Chasers come walking in, led by Alicia who was a Prefect. They were talking to themselves, so he guessed they had not seen his little indiscretion and he felt relieved.

"Harry?" Alicia called out to him. "Wood sent us to get you. It's time to go."

He looked at the parchment in his hand and shoved it into a pocket. He would tell McGonagall after the match. "OK," was all he said as he rose and joined them.

"Are you going to be all right today?" Katie asked him. She had always shown a little more concern for him, maybe because she was only one year older.

He nodded. "I think so. I'm sure once I'm flying it'll be fine. After all, they said she would be cured tomorrow."

Katie patted him on the back in a sisterly way; her hand did not linger there. "That's good to hear. At least we're only playing Hufflepuff and not Slytherin. They'll give us a good game, but they won't play dirty."

He nodded again and then looked at her with a mischievous smile. "And if I break my arm again, please don't let Lockhart anywhere near me."

All three girls laughed. Harry was starting to feel a little more like himself. He just had to ignore the missing part of himself for now, and that part would be returning tomorrow.

They were almost to the front doors when they heard Professor McGonagall's voice echoing throughout the castle. "All students will return to their house dormitories at once. All teachers return to the staff room. Immediately, please."

The girls all groaned. "There goes the game," Angelina said grumpily.

They all turned around and headed for the Gryffindor Tower. Harry thought about the parchment in his pocket. He had to tell someone. "I need to talk to McGonagall. I'll join you in a few minutes," he told them and dashed off before they could stop him. He had to think hard about where the staff room was. After taking one wrong turn, he

backtracked and eventually found it, just as McGonagall was going in. He would have called out, but it was a long corridor.

Running, he approached the room and started to knock when he heard her voice through the door.

"It has happened," she said. "A student has been taken by the monster. Right into the Chamber itself."

He heard a squeal, and suspected Professor Flitwick had made it.

"How can you be sure?" Snape's unmistakable voice demanded.

"The Heir of Slytherin left another message. Right underneath the first one. It said: Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber for ever."

"Who is it? Which student?" That sounded like Madam Hooch.

"We believe it's Ginny Weasley." Professor McGonagall's voice shocked him. Ron's sister?

"We shall have to send all the students home tomorrow," said Professor McGonagall.

Whatever else she might have said Harry did not get to hear because footsteps were coming in his direction from a side corridor. Harry hastily fled and hid in an alcove just before Lockhart came around the corner and went into the staff room. He had heard enough and knew he had to tell Ron. After all, he would want someone else to tell him if something had happened to Hermione. He took off at a jog for the Tower, Ron should be there by now.

He was a little out of breath when he got there, but he gave the password and went in. Ron was easy to find. Harry did not see the other brothers anywhere, so he went over to his most-of-the-time friend.

"Ron!" He grabbed the boy's arm and yanked him away from where he had been talking with Dean and Seamus.

Ron almost stumbled and barely kept his balance. When Harry stopped, he jerked his arm away. "What's gotten into you?"

"Ssh!" he hissed. "Listen. I was just outside of the staff room to tell McGonagall something, and I heard her say that Ginny's been taken -- and that they're going to close the school."

Ron stared for a moment and Harry could practically see the thoughts in his head. "They're not going to search for her, are they?" he said very quietly and looked sort of sick.

What could Harry say to that? It did sound that way from what he heard. "I don't know. I didn't get to hear everything. Lockhart came late and I had to leave."

Ron suddenly looked wildly around. Harry had seen that look before back at the beginning of the year in King's Cross. It was not hard to guess that he was looking for his brothers, but did not see them either.

"Let's go, we have to save her," Ron told him and grabbed Harry's arm, pulling him towards the Portrait hole.

Harry nodded, pulled off his Quidditch robes (dropping them on the floor), and followed. Outside the common room, Ron stopped for a second. A look of defeat was on his face. "We really don't know where to go, do we?"

"Actually, I do," Harry told him and started walking with Ron following. "Professor McGonagall said a new message was written under the first one."

"You mean the one outside of that girls' bathroom?"

"Yeah, that one," Harry said agreeably. "Also, if you think about it, all the victims were found near there, too. I just found a piece of parchment from Hermione that had the word 'pipes' on the bottom of it, that's why I was looking for McGonagall."

Ron grinned. "And bathrooms have pipes."

Harry hoped this next part went over as well. "The parchment also talked about a Basilisk. Hermione thinks a Basilisk is what's doing this."

"But, but Basilisks kill people," Ron protested.

"Normally, but that's only if they look at you directly. If there is something else in the way, like a mirror, a camera, or a ghost, then you're only petrified," Harry explained.

"But what about Ginny?" Ron asked, the fear in his voice very evident.

They rounded the corner, almost to the bathroom, and literally ran into Lockhart, knocking the man back a step and ruining his concentration, which caused the trunk floating behind him to drop to the floor.

The man flashed his patented smile. "Boys, what are you doing here? You should be in your dorms where it's safe."

Ron was looking between the man and his trunk. He quickly whipped out his wand and pointed it at his professor. "You're running away, aren't you?"

In the surprise of the moment, Harry reached out and took the man's wand that he was starting to lift and point towards them. Harry also

caught a glimpse of why Ron was put into Gryffindor.

"You're a teacher and you will help us search for my sister," the redhead ordered the man, flicking his wand down the corridor.

Lockhart understood and started walking in that direction. They all saw the messages, old and new.

"I'm terribly sorry," Lockhart said a little too jovially for the situation. "I'd like to help, but no one knows where to look." He started to walk away and Ron pointed his wand at Lockhart's face. The man froze to the spot.

"Actually, we have a good idea," Harry said and walked into the girl's bathroom.

"Who are you?" said a girl's voice. It was high-pitched and a little grating.

Harry looked around and saw a ghost of what looked like a fourth-year sitting on the window sill. "I'm Harry. I don't think we've met. Who are you?"

She giggled. "Of course not, you're not a girl. What are you doing in here? Not that I don't mind, because I don't. So few people come in here."

"Oh, we're looking for a friend, a little red-haired girl. She should have come in here recently. Have you seen her?" Harry was thankful the other two were keeping quiet.

"She was here and left over there." A ghostly arm pointed at the sinks.

"Thanks." Harry walked that way and started looking around. "What did you say your name was?"

The ghost giggled again. "I'm Myrtle. You're kind of cute, and you're nice, too. If something happens to you, would you like to stay with me in my pipes?"

Harry was squatting down and looking when he heard the word. "Do you know anything about the snake that moves around in the pipes?"

Whatever good mood Myrtle had left her. "I think that was what killed me." She sniffled for a moment before wailing and zooming off into a toilet. They all heard a splash and then nothing more.

"That was bizarre, but at least you got some information out of her," Ron said.

While Harry agreed with the sentiment, it had been stated a bit rudely. That did seem to be typical Ron, he thought. Looking back to the sinks, he saw it -- a snake symbol. He remembered back to the time it seemed like he could talk to a snake, when he was at the zoo with his cousin. Focusing on the snake, he said, "Open." To everyone's surprise, the sinks started to move. Harry jumped back. A moment later, they saw a big hole in the floor.

"Blimey," Ron breathed, "you're a Parseltongue." He looked a little scared as well.

"Huh?" That made no sense to Harry, and a glance at Lockhart showed the man to be looking very concerned, adding to the mystery.

"A Parseltongue. You can speak like a snake. I heard you hiss," Ron insisted.

"All I heard myself say was 'open'," Harry explained.

"Weird." Ron shuddered and seemed to get a grip on himself. He

leaned over a little to look down. He shook his head and turned around. "You, get down there," he ordered Lockhart, motioning to the hole with his wand.

"You want me to jump down there?" Lockhart asked, looking incredulous.

"You're the teacher. After all the adventures you've had, this should be easy," Ron taunted him. When Lockhart did not move, Ron did, getting behind the man and pushing. It was unexpected and Lockhart went head-first into the darkness, yelling all the way down. Ron looked at Harry and Harry nodded. Ron lit his wand, took a step, and jumped feet first.

Now what? Harry asked himself as he too lit his wand and jumped into the hole. Unbeknownst to him, when the room emptied, the sinks moved back, as they had been magicked.

After a long slide, Harry arrived in a place where the floor was covered in muck and rat bones. Unfortunately, he slid to a stop on his back in said muck. He could understand why Lockhart was staring at his own robes and muttering. Lockhart even had some of the muck in his hair. Harry just shrugged and got up. Ron was watching Lockhart with amusement, so Harry walked on. The place they were in opened up into a much larger room, although the ceiling was not too high. It was all rock, basically an underground cave. He walked on, vaguely aware that Ron and Lockhart were following.

"Blimey!" Ron shouted, which echoed.

Harry looked where his friend was pointing, and to the side he could see a huge snake's skin. If the snake had shed that, Harry wondered how big the snake was now.

"Harry!" Ron shouted, a warning in his voice.

Harry turned and saw Ron and Lockhart struggling over Ron's wand. To his dismay, Lockhart seemed to be winning.

"This story will be mine too," Lockhart said through gritted teeth as he struggled with Ron.

A spell went off and it shot towards the ceiling. As the first bits of rock came down, Harry scrambled and then dove away. A huge crashing sound made him continue to roll away. When the sound had basically stopped, Harry quit rolling and looked back. In the light of only his wand, Harry saw rocks from floor to ceiling. He was trapped!

"Ron!" he shouted, hoping to hear an answer.

It was quiet for a few seconds and he started to panic when he heard a muffled, "Harry!" He sighed with relief. "Are you all right, mate?!"

"Yeah, I'm fine. How about you?!"

"I'm, I'm mostly good! A rock caught me in the leg and I think it may be broken, but I'm not bleeding or anything!"

Madam Pomfrey could easily fix broken bones, Harry thought with a grin. "What about Lockhart?!" Harry thought he heard a muffled laugh, but he was not sure.

"When we were fighting over my wand, he tried a second spell! I managed to hit his arm and I think he hit himself with the spell! He's out cold right now!"

Harry snorted. "The idiot," he mumbled.

"He broke my wand, Harry! It's completely dark over here! I can't see a thing! Do you think you can pass Lockhart's wand to me?!"

Harry had forgotten about it. "I can try!" He climbed the new rock

wall.

"Over to the left, Harry!" Ron shouted. "I can see a little more light there!"

Harry moved over. He pulled a few small rocks away. He could see some more smaller rocks at the top, but most of the rocks were very large. "I can't do much more than that from here. The rocks are too big."

"I can see more light," Ron told him, his voice not as muffled and he did not have to shout now. "Can you throw it through? Maybe I can get it."

Not knowing what else to try, Harry pulled out Lockhart's wand. He held his lit wand near the hole to try and shine the light through. "Here it comes." He threw the wand sort of like a spear and hoped for the best. Listening carefully, he did hear it make a noise as it fell.

"I see it. Stay where you are for a minute."

Harry could hear some rocks being tossed and grunts from Ron.

"I got it," Ron called.

Harry moved his wand down and sure enough, there was now light coming from the hole on Ron's side.

"Hey, Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"I'll try to make the hole bigger, but can you continue on? I hate to ask you to do that, since it's my sister, but my leg won't let me continue," he said a little angrily.

"I understand. Stay there and try to think of a way back up. I'll bring her out, Ron. If there's any way possible, I'll bring her out." Harry promised, trying to console him.

"Thanks mate! I'd do the same for Hermione if our places were reversed."

Harry smiled to himself. Maybe there was more to Ron than he thought. He would have to talk to Hermione about that tomorrow. "I'm leaving now. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Good luck, Harry!"

With a sigh, Harry climbed down the rocks and walked onward. Soon, he came to a door that had two metal snakes encircling it. Since it worked last time, he stared at the snakes and said, "Open." The snakes moved and the door opened.

Surprisingly, there was a weak light coming through the doorway. Harry poked his head in and saw a chamber nearly the size of the Great Hall with a few torches on the walls. It was very eerie looking.

He stepped through the doorway and extinguished his wand, although he kept it out. He wished he had learned more spells.

Again, it was all rock down here. There were a number of columns holding the ceiling up. About halfway through the chamber, he could see to the end and make out a big statue of a man's face. He could also hear the slow yet steady drip of water into a small pool at the base of the statue. That suggested he was under the lake. A few steps later, he saw something on the floor that looked like a body. He lit his wand and ran over. Sure enough, it was Ginny.

"Don't be dead, please don't be dead," he muttered as he ran the light over her, looking for injury. "Ron would be so upset." Curiously, he saw no injury. She looked like she was only asleep, so he shook

her shoulder. "Wake up, Ginny, wake up!" He was happy to note that her body shook, so she was not petrified.

"She won't wake," a voice said from the shadows.

Harry turned and held up his wand to see more clearly.

A boy walked forward, twirling a wand as he did.

Harry knew him from the memory. "You're Riddle, Tom Riddle." Things were started to click into place, but he was quite sure there were important pieces of the puzzle still missing.

"Very good."

Harry looked down at Ginny.

"She's still alive, at least for the moment," Riddle confirmed.

"What are you? A ghost? You look just like you did in the book." He had to get more information.

Riddle chuckled. "No, just a well preserved memory." The wand stopped twirling for a moment and pointed to a little book at the edge of the shadows beyond Ginny's head.

It was the book he had found near Valentine's Day and that had later gone missing. The one that had T.M. Riddle embossed on it. Tom Riddle. He mentally berated himself; he should have figured that out earlier.

"Can you help me with her? I need to wake her up and get out of here. The monster might come back." Harry was almost pleading with him.

Riddle laughed and then abruptly stopped. "No. No, I can't do that.

You see, I need her here, and I need what she has brought me."

"What has she brought you?" This conversation was tiring; he had to drag every little thing out of Riddle.

"Well, you for one." Riddle laughed at Harry's surprised look. "Yes, you. I was hoping to find out more about you. I caused her to write to me and pulled her in. The drive I had to listen to was excruciating. She never would tell me what a baby, a plain and common baby, did to defeat me."

"I defeated you?" Harry asked confused. "I just stopped writing in your little book."

"No, not that," Riddle said a little exasperated. "When you were a baby," he said as if it all should have been clear.

"But I've never seen you before. When I was a baby, Voldemort was the one I defeated."

Riddle shook his head in pity. "They teach you nothing in History, do they?" He used the wand in his hand to write 'TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE' in fiery letters in the air. Then he used the wand to rearrange them. When he was finished, the letters now said, "I AM LORD VOLDEMORT".

"You see," the boy continued. "Even back when I was sixteen, almost seventeen, I knew that I was destined to be great."

"You're not. Everyone knows you fear Dumbledore, the greatest wizard ever." Harry was not sure he fully believed it, but it was what everyone said.

The superior look on Riddle's face was replaced by one of hatred. "And yet, Dumbledore has been driven from the school by a mere memory of me."

Harry did not know what to say to that, as it was pretty much true.

"The longer you talk to me, the longer you stay alive. So tell me, how did you defeat me?" Riddle was back to irritatingly calm questioning, much more like Dumbledore than Riddle probably wanted to admit.

Hoping for something that would give him a clue as to what to do, Harry decided to talk. "I did nothing. My mother must have done something with her sacrifice, or so I'm told."

Riddle considered that. "Hmm, one of the Ancient Magics I suppose. A ritual done beforehand and sealed with her sacrifice. Very clever for a Mudblood."

"Don't you call her that!" Harry shouted angrily. As he clenched his fists, he felt the wand in his hand. Impulsively, he whipped it around and cast, "Diffindo!" The cutting charm was one they had recently learned in class. Flitwick had cautioned them never to use it on a person, except in life and death situations, as it would cut people as well as objects.

The spell went right through Riddle, like he was a ghost.

Riddle laughed. "You can't hurt me, Potter. But if you want to play, I have a playmate for you." He turned to the statue and hissed, although Harry could understand him perfectly. "Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four."

The statue started to move and the mouth opened, creating a large hole. Hearing a slithering sound, Harry started to panic. He looked around and saw Ginny on the floor. He reached down and grabbed her robes and pulled her to the side next to one of the columns and in the shadows. He hoped she would be safe there. Looking down at his feet at the edge of the shadows, he saw the diary sitting there.

As a splash came from the base of the statue, Harry reached down and picked up the diary. Everything seemed to lead to it, but he did not know what to do.

"Kill him!" Riddle hissed.

"Yes, Master," was hissed back very loudly.

Harry ran towards the other end of the chamber. Maybe he could get through the other door and do something to the snake in the opening. Maybe he could drop a big rock on its head.

He was almost halfway down the chamber when the slithering noise sounded very close behind him. Jumping sideways as he came to a column, he hid behind it and heard what he assumed was the Basilisk slithering past him. He looked back towards the statue and saw the body of the snake was about chest high on him, or about three feet thick. He guessed there was over forty feet of snake trailing towards the statue. This was at least twice the size of the skin he had seen before. He did not think he could stay alive for very long this way, he knew he had to do something different.

As he heard the snake turn and the slithering start to come closer, Harry jumped out from behind the column and ran to the other side of the chamber and the other row of columns. Maybe he could get the snake wrapped around a few columns. Of course, this required him to jump over the body of the snake. He put his closed fists on the top of it and swung his legs and feet over, like he used to do to jump fences to get away from Dudley and his gang. He was surprised at the feel of the snake skin. It was soft and hard at the same time, sort of like if you could make cloth out of steel.

The snake hissed and it sounded angry.

Harry continued running, the diary in one fist and his wand in the other. When the snake hissed again, Harry decided to give talking to

it a try. "You don't have to do this, you know."

The snake stopped moving. "Another speaker? You are only the fourth I have ever met."

That surprised Harry, but it was a start. "Yes, I can speak to you. Listen, if you let me live, I can help you. Maybe I can find a way for you to get into the forest above so you can escape."

He studied the diary and seeing his wand, he decided to see what he could do. "Diffindo," he whispered. The spell hit the bottom edge of the diary and nothing was cut. He mentally cursed. He would have to do something else, but he was almost sure the diary was the key. Everything kept going back to the diary.

"That would be nice. My route to the forest has become blocked over time," the snake hissed back.

"Do not listen to him!" Riddle hissed. "Kill him!"

"I am sorry, but I am bound to him and I must obey." The slithering started again.

Harry dashed out from behind the column and continued his run towards the other door. As the sound became close again, he jumped behind another column. Looking back, he could see the coils of the snake and he noticed that the snake was so large, it could not turn very tightly. Maybe he could use that to his advantage.

The nose of a large head suddenly appeared to his left side and Harry moved right, but not before seeing several very large teeth or fangs.

"Stand still and I will make this quick," the snake hissed at him.

Harry noticed it pulling back, presumably to strike again. He suddenly

had an idea. It might work if he got very lucky. "I would be willing if I knew you'd bite me instead of looking at me."

The slithering stopped for a second. "Why? My stare would be faster and less painful for you."

"Because I don't want to become a statue for Riddle to gloat over," Harry hissed, hoping the snake went for it. Actually he had no idea if he would be frozen into a statue if he looked into the snake's eyes, but he could not come up with a better idea. "If you bite me, you could eat me afterwards. That would guarantee there's nothing left for him to make fun of me."

"True, you would fill me for a while and be the best meal I've had in a very long time. My path to the forest was closed not long after this place was last opened. I've had to hibernate to survive."

"Kill him!" Riddle hissed, but it was weak since he was far away, apparently unwilling to move far from where he was.

"If you'll move slowly so I can see only the end of your mouth, I'll put my hand out and you can bite me," Harry offered, not quite believing he was doing this. He put his curled left hand out a little. It held the diary, mostly hidden behind his hand and wrist.

A slightly warm wind momentarily hit the back of his hand. "A little more," the snake hissed.

Harry moved it a few more inches out, watching the floor for the bottom of the snake's snout to avoid the snake's eyes. Finally, the end of the snout came into view and it was opened. He moved his hand out and down a little more so the curled hand was right next to the teeth. He uncurled his hand and let the book touch the side of the fang and then laid it on top. He was holding the book by the corner, hoping most of his hand was actually outside the mouth. "Bite me," he hissed.

The mouth closed and the tough skin brushed his hand. He jerked it back and looked. It had been pinched in the folds of the skin of the mouth, much like being slammed in a door. It would be a little bruised, but he was basically unhurt.

From the other end of the chamber came a scream.

"Riddle!" he yelled in English. There was no answer.

"What have you done?" the snake hissed and then shook its head for a moment. "The bond is broken." The hissing did not sound completely normal.

Harry almost sagged to the floor, but managed to remain upright only by leaning on the column. "I'm sorry I tricked you, but I let you bite the book. It was what was causing all the trouble. You were bound to it. Are you sad not to be bound?"

"I am glad to be free of the bond. Even though you lied to me, I will not kill you because you freed me. But could you take this thing out of my mouth? It is hard to talk with it there."

"Oh, right. Sorry. Open your mouth and stay very still. I would feel a lot better if you closed your eyes too."

"My eyes are closed."

Harry slowly moved back around the column until he saw just the end of the snout, preferring to be safe in case the snake's eyes were still open. He saw the book impaled on a fang. He reached over and worked it up off the tooth. A black stain was left on the tooth, which Harry assumed was ink. "I'm sorry I lied to you. It was the only way I could think of to break the bond. I won't do it again. There, I've removed the book."

"Thank you." The hissing sounded normal again. "I must take a drink. I have a bad taste in my mouth. Do not worry, I will not look at you or the other one."

Harry heard the snake move back and then past him, heading for the pool. It was not until the head had gone by that he realized he had looked. Fortunately, the snake did indeed have its eyes closed. Remembering what it said about "the other one", Harry ran around the snake and over to where Ginny was.

When he shook her, she started to breathe deeply and her eyes fluttered open. "Are you all right?" he asked her, hoping she was. He watched her stare at him for a moment as if surprised to see him there, which he supposed she should be.

"You, you saved my life. I was going to die and you saved my life!" She sounded like her life's dream had been fulfilled.

He smiled at her. "I'm glad you're safe." As he said that, Harry started to feel a strange something in his mind, something wonderful that he had been missing. It only took him a couple of seconds to realize what had happened. Without meaning to, he had apparently bound someone else to him. To take one person's life choice away was bad enough, but now he had done it a second time. He closed his eyes and looked down. And yet, if he had not saved her, he was sure of the only one other possible outcome. Not only would she be dead, but Riddle would have become Voldemort once more, and that would not have been pleasant.

"Harry?" She called out to him, causing him to look at her. It was obvious she was about to cry. "Please don't hate me, please!"

Unable to stop himself, he reached down and pulled her up to him, hugging her tightly. "I don't hate you, Ginny. I think I hate myself for what I've done to you, but I hope you understand I had no choice."

"I could never hate you, Harry," she said fervently.

Harry noticed that she did not let go of him, as well as that her bare arms were around his neck. He supposed there was a simple way to find out if his thoughts were true, even if he was all but certain. "Ginny, I need to find out something. Please let me go for just a moment, OK?"

"But it feels so good to touch you," she said meekly, as if not wanting to admit that.

"I'm sure it does, but just for a moment. Then you can hold my hand again, I promise." He felt her head move up and down before her arms came away. As she finally let go, the wonderful feeling he had been immersed in left, confirming his assumption. She was bonded to him, as sure as she now looked suddenly lost and maybe in pain. He held out his hand and she quickly took it.

A look of pleasure came over her. "Why? Why does it feel so good to touch you?" She looked down suddenly. "And I can talk to you easily now, too," she said in a soft voice, as if she had not meant to say that out loud.

He noticed a blush come over her and grinned. She was cute, he admitted. Hopefully they were as compatible as he and Hermione. That thought made him wonder how Hermione was going to take all of this. He was sure she would kill him. Fortunately, she knew Ginny and seemed to get along with the younger girl already, so maybe this would not be too bad.

"Wizard," came a hiss from behind him.

Ginny screamed.

"Ssh," he told her. "I know there's a Basilisk there, but we're friends, I suppose."

"With a huge Basilisk?" The raw fear in her voice could not be missed.

"Yeah, my life is strange. What can I say?" he grinned at her and she relaxed -- a little.

"My name is Harry," he hissed. "Do you have a name?"

"You may call me Sheba. Salazar called me that."

"Sheba, we wish to leave and to leave you in peace, but I did promise to help you," Harry hissed. "What do you need to get into the forest?"

"There is a doorway to my left, or behind you. If you can clear it, I can leave here to feed on my own. I stay here when not feeding."

"All right," Harry agreed. "Please continue to keep your eyes closed."

"I will not hurt either of you as long as you do not attack me. You are very clever for a young one, but I can tell you do not have the ability to bind me, as the other did."

"No, I don't. I wouldn't even want to. Please tell me, Sheba. Why are you here?" Harry hissed before whispering to Ginny. "Hold my hand and come with me."

Ginny looked at him with reverence and not a little fear, but did as he asked.

He slowly led her over to the snake. They stopped to pick up Ginny's wand from where Riddle had dropped it when the magic died.

The snake hissed, "I was put here by Salazar to protect the school."

Harry helped Ginny over the body of the snake, then climbed over himself. They walked to the wall to look for the other door. Harry lit his wand, prompting Ginny to light hers as well so they could see better. "There is a story that says Salazar Slytherin put you here to purify the school, to kill those not worthy. Is that a true or false story?"

In the middle of the left wall, they found the other door. The snake had slowly slithered down the middle of the chamber so she was close by, but thankfully not too close.

"That is a false story. He was a very kind man as long as he was not attacked. The school was attacked not long after it was built. Salazar helped to defend the school. After the attack, he created me and charged me with defending the school when he could not after he was gone." It paused for a moment. "Perhaps the false story came from my defending the school many years later. Those that had no magic tried to attack and I helped to defend the school, killing many."

Harry was looking in the open doorway. There were many rocks in the tunnel. Fortunately, they all looked to be about the size of a dog or smaller. He asked Ginny to do the levitation charm, pulling them out and stacking them to the side. Once he saw she was able to do that, he joined her and did the same.

"That is a possibility," Harry hissed back. "Many legends are stories that are twisted through the years." The snake did not reply.

As they moved rocks, more fell down. After many tedious minutes, they seemed to stop falling. Harry stepped through the doorway and looked as far as he could see; Ginny stayed back, stretching their arms. The tunnel sloped up and to the left.

"We've cleared this part. I don't know if there is more blockage or not," Harry hissed.

"Stand to the side and I will test it," the snake hissed.

Harry moved over and turned his face away, gently turning Ginny's head as well. They heard slithering and both tensed a little, not really being able to help it.

A moment later, the snake hissed, although it sounded a little distant. Harry turned and saw that the head was in the tunnel, although the body was still in the chamber. "The smell is fresher. I believe the way will be clear. Can you come back at a later time?"

"Yes," Harry agreed. "Can I ask you one more question?"

"Yes."

"Is there anything else down here? Or is it just a place for you?"

There was a hissing that sounded very strange. "No, Harry, I am all that remains. Riddle asked that as well. He was very disappointed."

Harry found that amusing, and then realized the strange sound from the snake must have been laughing.

"I was just curious. Happy hunting, Sheba. I have heard there is a colony of giant spiders in the forest now," Harry told the snake.

"Thank you. When you leave, close the other door. When you return, stand at the door and call for me. If I am here, I will close my eyes and answer."

"Good-bye for now, Sheba."

"Good-bye, Harry." The snake started to disappear into the tunnel.

Harry looked down at Ginny, whose expression was a mixture of fear and awe. "What?"

"You're a Parseltongue, a natural one."

"Actually, probably not. I think I got the ability when I got my curse scar. You can probably speak it too, you know. You did get down here," he half stated and half asked as he led her to the other door.

"No, I had no idea what you were saying. The only reason I could get down here is because of the diary," she explained, looking sad and guilty. As they came to the doorway to the ante-chamber, she asked, "Are you the only one who came down here to rescue me?" She had a shy look.

"No, Ron came with me, and we forced Lockhart to come, but as you'll see in a minute, there was an accident and rocks stopped them from coming." He continued to stand at the doorway, not moving through it. "We have a problem we need to discuss before we find them."

"What?" She looked very comfortable, as if she trusted him completely, which he supposed she probably did right now, even if it was a magically induced feeling.

"We're going to want to stay touching for about the next day."

"How do you know?" she asked with a puzzled look.

He pulled her back from the doorway and sat on a rock ledge that was nearby. "Because Hermione and I are connected, or bonded, or whatever this is -- just like you and I are now."

She sucked her breath in and seemed to hold it for a long time. "You're serious," she finally said.

Harry nodded. "I'll tell you all about it soon, but we probably want to find a way to stay down here until this wears off. The problem with that is that they will come looking for us eventually, and your brother

has an injured leg. So he needs to see Madam Pomfrey." He spread his hands. "I don't know how we're going to do this."

"Have I been missing very long?" Ginny asked him after a moment.

"Yeah, it's probably been at least a couple of hours," Harry said, trying to think of how much time might have passed.

Ginny nodded slowly. "If we go up now, my mother will probably be there. If she is, she'd grab me and try to take me home to protect me; she's very protective of us. Since you know what's going on, you're probably right that we need to stay down here." She looked up at him, arching one eyebrow. "Does it wear off?"

"It does," he said with a slight chuckle. "We'll be able to be apart and act normally after the well, the initial period. I guess the bond, as I'm starting to think of it, takes about a day to settle in. I'll explain more soon, but we really need to find your brother. He's probably going spare by now."

She giggled faintly and Harry was glad she was taking this so well. Given the other trauma that they had just come through, he wondered if the bond was somehow responsible for putting her in a good mood as well. After standing back up, they walked together into the antechamber and to the rock fall. "Ron!" Harry shouted.

"Harry! Did you find her?!" Ron shouted back.

He looked up at the hole and saw that it was no bigger. He looked at her and smiled.

"I'm here, Ron!" Ginny shouted.

"Whoo-Hoo!"

Harry and Ginny both laughed briefly.

"How are you doing, Ron?!" Harry asked.

"My leg still hurts! Lockhart woke up, but he's strange! It's like he doesn't know what's going on anymore! He just sits there talking nonsense to himself or sleeps! I tried to make the hole bigger, but I couldn't! Most of the rocks were too big to move and a few of ones I did move caused more to come down from the ceiling! Ginny, are you OK?!"

"I'm fine, Ron! I'll tell you about it later when I don't have to shout!"

"So how are we getting out of here, Harry?!"

"That's a really good question, Ron! Let me think about it for a few minutes!" Harry looked at Ginny, who just shrugged. He looked at the pile of rocks and it seemed hopeless. He pulled Ginny along and looked all along the barrier. Perhaps a different place would be easier to get through.

Albus Dumbledore came out of the fireplace of his office with his usual aplomb. He had expected one of the occupants, but was not surprised to see the other two.

"Albus! Thank Merlin you're here," Minerva McGonagall exclaimed, sounding like a damsel in distress, despite showing her usual austere look.

"Minerva." He inclined his head before moving to the other two. "Arthur and Molly, I am distressed at the news and came as soon as I could."

Molly nodded, her face showing signs of crying and looking like she was about to start again.

"Thank you, Albus," Arthur told him grimly.

"While we are happy to see you, I'm surprised to see you back," Minerva said, looking a little eager for the answer.

Dumbledore smiled and let a little of his good nature show. "Upon a little investigation, I found that Lucius had artificially helped my departure along. That has been corrected." He stood a little straighter. "Now, I understand that Miss Weasley is missing. Has any progress been made on finding her, or have any clues been uncovered?"

Molly sniffled loudly upon hearing about her daughter.

"We just have the new message underneath the old one," Minerva told him. "However, there has been an added complication."

"Oh?"

"There are two more students missing, and one professor as well."

When Minerva hesitated to go on, Albus guessed, "I assume Professor Lockhart is nowhere to be found?"

Minerva looked surprised. "Precisely. His belongings were found in a corridor, but he is missing."

Dumbledore nodded. "Perhaps it's just as well that he has left us. And the students?"

McGonagall sighed. "I've been told that Mr Potter ran into the Gryffindor common room and pulled Mr Ronald Weasley aside. After a hurried conversation, they both ran out of the common room before anyone could stop them. They have not been seen since, and that was over two hours ago."

Molly bowed her head and silently cried. Arthur put an hand on her shoulder to comfort her.

"Perhaps I should go and look at this new message," Dumbledore said and then started to leave the room. Before he could leave, a flash of fire burst in and settled on a perch. Dumbledore smiled and walked over. "Ah, Fawkes. It's good to be back, is it not?" Fawkes trilled a little and Dumbledore lightly petted him with one finger. He stopped after a moment and looked at the Phoenix carefully. "Fawkes, is it possible for you to find Mr Potter, Mr Weasley, or Miss Weasley?"

Fawkes looked at him and turned his head a little one way and then the other, as if examining something very closely. After a long moment, he trilled and launched himself into the air and left in a ball of flames.

"Did he say he knows where they are?" Arthur quickly asked.

Dumbledore gave a small smile. "Fawkes and I don't use words to communicate. We share something more like emotions, such as that he was glad to be here."

"And before he left?" Arthur inquired.

Everyone was looking at him. "Before he left Fawkes shared something like satisfaction. It is very hard to explain, but the emotion is positive, so I am optimistic. I believe I should also stay here for a few minutes." He walked over to his cabinets and pulled out a tea set. A flick of his wand heated the pot so steam was coming out. "Tea anyone?" he offered and began pouring.

He had just handed out all the cups when a knock came from his door. His gargoyle must have been left open, he mused. He would have to change that back later this evening. "Enter," he called out.

The door swung open and a very prim and proper Lucius Malfoy strode in followed by a bedraggled house-elf. "You should not be here, Dumbledore," he drawled. "You have been dismissed."

Dumbledore reached into his robes and pulled a parchment out. "Interesting, Lucius, because the rest of the Board of Governors told me a different tale not more than fifteen minutes ago." He unfolded the parchment and held it up. "It seems all of them thought they had been hasty in their decision to support you after they heard that a student had been kidnapped. They wished me to return as soon as possible." With a large smile, Dumbledore added, "Their last motion put forth as I was leaving was to decide if it would be Augusta Longbottom who took your place or someone else. It sounded as if Augusta had enough support, assuming she is willing to serve."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed.

"Also, unless I am greatly mistaken, which I strongly doubt, it seems as if our missing students have been found," he said happily as he looked at the Weasleys.

Molly burst into tears and Arthur did his best to console her. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"Fawkes is sending me very satisfied feelings. I can think of no other reason for him to be so pleased. I would not be surprised to see them momentarily." For all the look of elation on the Weasleys' faces, he was surprised by the look of anger that flashed across Malfoy's face. He then noticed a very pleased house-elf in the middle of a celebration.

Malfoy noticed the elf doing a happy dance and scowled, then he became angry. "You, you've..." He suddenly shut up and tried to kick the elf. The elf moved but not enough and was clipped by the edge of Malfoy's boot, knocking him over. "You are no longer part of the family. As my last order, you are never to say anything about the

Malfoys or what you have seen or done in our house. Do you understand?"

The elf nodded and the squeaked, "Yes."

"Be gone with you then." Malfoy threw a glove at the elf, who caught it. "You are a disgrace to house-elves and I dismiss you from the House of Malfoy."

The elf looked at the glove with wide eyes and tears coming down his face. "Dobby is free. Dobby is happy!" He snapped his fingers and was gone.

As interesting as that was, Dumbledore was happy to see Malfoy sneer and then practically stomp out of his office. Albus wondered if he would find out what Dobby had done.

"What was that all about?" Minerva asked.

Dumbledore shrugged. "Beyond the politics? Only Lucius could say at the moment."

Anything else he could have said was interrupted by a flash of fire.

Harry was growing frustrated and tired. This was the eighth rock he had levitated away, only for another to fall and take its place. He and Ginny had yet to find a way for them to get through. As he sat down and contemplated what to try next, a flash of fire erupted overhead and a bird appeared. It glided and landed on a rock high on the wall before it trilled.

It took a moment for Harry to realize what had happened. "Fawkes..." he gasped quietly.

"What is that?"

"It's Dumbledore's phoenix. I met him earlier this year in the Headmaster's office," Harry told her as they watched the bird look around for a moment as he took in the surroundings of the cave.

The bird trilled a little and then glided down and stood on the floor before Harry and Ginny. They both reached out and petted him with one finger from their free hands. The phoenix gave a low guttural trill that made the two shudder, as if a wave of pleasure had gone through them.

"Wow, did you feel that?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah," he told her, each of them talking quietly. He looked back at Fawkes. "Are you here to help us get out?"

The bird nodded.

"Ron and Lockhart are on the other side of the wall. Can you help them too?"

The bird nodded again.

"Wait," Ginny quickly said. "Harry, we need to let Fawkes take the others back, but we should stay here until tomorrow. He could come back then."

Harry nodded. "Good idea, but how do we explain staying here?"

She lightly pulled at a strand of her hair, pulling it around her jaw as she stood there deep in thought. "I don't know. The only thing I can think of is to tell Ron that you're magically exhausted and are asleep and can't be moved until you wake. I can't pick you up, so we're stuck until you wake up. You haven't talked to him for something like half an hour and he can't hear us when we talk quietly like this, so he

shouldn't really know."

He thought about that. "That sounds really lame, but I can't come up with anything better."

"Fawkes," Harry addressed the phoenix. "We need to you to take Ron and Lockhart back. They are both hurt and need Madam Pomfrey. Ginny and I need to stay here until tomorrow because," he paused not sure how to say it.

A trill interrupted him. The bird walked forward and nudged his head against their joined hands.

Harry smiled. "Yeah, we need to stay here because of that, even though I know that will make some people upset. Can you help us stay here?"

Fawkes trilled and nodded.

"You're the best," Harry happily told him, petting him again. If he didn't know better, Harry would have said the bird was very smug in his answer. Ginny joined in petting him and again Fawkes gave the low guttural trill the seemed to please everyone. Seeming to understand, Fawkes jumped up on Ginny's shoulder and nudged her with his head.

"I guess I'm supposed to do my part now," she said with a smile. When she let go of Harry's hand, the wonderful feeling went away. She sighed and got up. A moment later, she had climbed the rock barrier and was in front of the small hole that went through to the other side. She could talk here and not shout too loudly.

"Ron?"

"Ginny? Did you find something? It's been really quiet." He sounded worried.

"Yeah, we have a visitor over here."

"What?" he squeaked. "Did the Basilisk come back?"

"No," she told him with a smile, looking through the hole that was barely as large as her head. She was doing her best not to tease him. "Dumbledore's phoenix came to see us. He can help you and Lockhart get back." The bird jumped off her shoulder and walked through the small hole that connected them. "Fawkes is coming through."

"Blimey! It's a real phoenix," Ron exclaimed a moment later.

"Ron? Try getting Lockhart to hold onto you."

"OK. Then we'll get him to come back for both of you," Ron said excitedly.

"Uh, yeah, it will be later though."

"What? Why not now?"

He sounded confused and she was not going to help that much. "Ron, you haven't heard from Harry for awhile because he fell asleep. He looks fine, so I think he's just magically exhausted himself in the fight. Trying to move big rocks after all that fighting seemed like it did him in before I noticed and could stop him."

"But, you could grab him, couldn't you?"

"I don't think I'm strong enough," she countered. "Go on back, Ron. Harry just needs to sleep and then Fawkes can bring us up later. Everyone else needs to know we're all okay right now and Harry said that you need to see Madam Pomfrey."

"I suppose." Ron sounded like he did not like the idea, but he was willing to go along with it.

"If you could convince Fawkes to bring a picnic basket back down, that would be useful. I haven't eaten since breakfast," she added.

"Right, I'll see what I can..."

There was a flash and then there was no light coming through the hole. Ginny assumed they were gone and quickly crawled back down to Harry. She grabbed the hand that he was holding up and the good feelings washed over her again. She did not think she would ever get tired of that.

Harry pulled out his wand and cast a Bluebell Flame spell to give them some light. He was thankful to Hermione for teaching him that. He then cast a Cushioning charm on the ground and sat on it. Ginny smiled and joined him.

"Well, we have a long time to wait and we have a lot to talk about. Hermione and I shared a lot on the first day to get to know one another better," he told her.

"That sounds like a good idea, but we could be more comfortable while we talk," she suggested.

"Oh? How?"

Ginny raised her wand and cast a cleaning charm on both of them to clean their clothes. Then, she grinned impishly and pushed Harry backwards so he was lying on his back, floating at what appeared to be about a foot off the floor. She crawled over next to him and lay down next to him on her side, snuggling up and lying her head on his shoulder. Their hands were clasped and lying on his stomach. "Like this."

Harry chuckled as he blushed. The two girls were clearly very, very different.

One moment Ron was holding onto Lockhart's arm in the cave near the Chamber of Secrets, and the next he was in the Headmaster's office, courtesy of Fawkes the phoenix. As glad as he was to be out of there, he was also in a lot of pain as he was dropped abruptly and landed on both of his feet. His right leg was now filled with shooting pains, which caused him to groan and grab his leg with both hands.

"Ron!" His mother yelled his name and rushed to him, shoving an unaware Lockhart to the side. "We've got to get him to the hospital wing immediately," she said as if her word was law. However, no one made a move.

Dumbledore looked at his Defence professor, surprised to see him there. "Gilderoy, what happened?"

The man still had his winning smile, even if his blond hair and normally pristine robes were a filthy mess. He looked up from where he sat on the floor. "Hello there. Do I know you? Who is Gilderoy?"

Dumbledore barely stopped himself from doing a double take. "Mr Weasley, we'll get you to the hospital wing in a moment, but could you give us the short version of what happened?" He paused as he realized there was another problem. "And could you also tell us where Mr Potter and Miss Weasley are?"

Ron did his best to sit up, despite how much his leg hurt. His father moved over and sat next to him and let him lean against him. "Thanks, Dad," he quietly said.

"Glad to help. Does your leg hurt enough that we need to numb it for you for a few minutes?"

"Uh, yeah, I think that would be good if you could." Ron hated to admit that he was hurt that bad, but it was really throbbing after waiting a couple of hours, sitting only on rock, and then being dumped on the floor.

Professor McGonagall pulled out her wand and applied the numbing charm before she did a quick diagnosis. "Just a simple fracture and some bruising. Madam Pomfrey will have it fixed in a trice."

"Thank you, Professor," Ron said with a smile.

"Can you tell us what happened?" Dumbledore asked again.

"Err, sure, Professor. Harry heard that the person who was missing was Ginny, so he came and told me. I couldn't find my brothers, so we hurried to find her."

"But how did you know where to go?" McGonagall asked.

"Harry knew it was in the loo. He said everything that happened was always around that girl's loo on the second floor. As we got near there, we ran into Professor Lockhart trying to leave with his trunk, so we sort of forced him to go along with us." Ron hung his head but no one criticized that decision.

"Is that me you're talking about? Am I a Professor?" the man asked, as if very pleased with something. Everyone ignored him.

"We met a ghost in the bathroom and she talked about seeing Ginny over by the sinks. Harry found something and hissed at them and they moved to show us a hole in the floor." Ron looked at the Headmaster. "Did you know Harry is a Parseltongue?" Several people gasped; his mother was the loudest.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "No, Mr Weasley, I did not. However,

I'm not completely surprised. Please continue."

"Err, right. Anyway, we went down the hole and into this underground cave. I saw this huge snake skin and that's when Lockhart tried to take my wand away from me. He grabbed it from me and when I tried to get it back, he shot off a spell that caused a part of the ceiling to come down." His mother gasped. "Harry ran one way while Lockhart and I ran the other. I then managed to get my wand back, but not before he cast a second spell. I think he hit himself with it though. I don't know what he cast."

"I see," Dumbledore drawled. "Based on his condition, I'd have to say he was trying to Oblivate you."

"No!" Molly exclaimed angrily.

"Fortunately, it missed your son," Dumbledore assured the woman. "What happened next, Mr Weasley?"

"Well, I found that Lockhart had broken my wand and that Harry was still alive. Harry managed to open a small hole at the top of the rocks and throw Lockhart's wand to me so I could have light and try to make a bigger hole. But one of the rocks had landed on my leg and hurt it, so I couldn't move very well. I never was able to make the hole any bigger."

"And Mr Potter?"

"Oh, I told him to go on and save Ginny. It took him a long time, probably over an hour, but it was hard to tell time down there. He finally came back and had Ginny with him," Ron said happily.

"Oh, thank Merlin," Molly said, so happy she was about to cry.

Dumbledore looked at Ron and then at Fawkes who was sitting very calmly on his perch. "Then where are Mr Potter and Miss Weasley?"

Ron looked down. "Uh, well, when I couldn't move the rock, Harry tried. I didn't hear from them for awhile, and then Ginny crawled up to the little hole we had. She told me that between fighting the Basilisk..."

"Basilisk?!" several people shouted at once.

Ron looked embarrassed. "Err, yeah, sorry, I guess I skipped that part. He said he had to fight a Basilisk. He did convince it to leave them alone, since he could talk to it."

"Mr Weasley," Dumbledore looked at him very carefully. "I gather that a Basilisk came out of the Chamber of Secrets, and while the creatures do not normally petrify people, I do understand how that could happen. However, I do not understand how your sister got into the Chamber of Secrets. Can you explain that?"

"No, sir," Ron said as he shook his head. "They didn't tell me."

"Very well. You were trying to tell us about after they returned and Miss Weasley had talked to you through the little hole," Dumbledore prompted.

"Right. Ginny crawled up to the little hole and told me that Harry had magically exhausted himself between fighting the Basilisk and trying to move rocks. So she sent Fawkes through to bring us back. She also said that it seemed best to let Harry sleep and recover and then Fawkes could bring them back later."

"Absolutely not!" Molly Weasley thundered, making everyone but Dumbledore cringe. "I want my daughter back right now!"

Dumbledore found the situation quite interesting and wondered how it would play out. He turned to his familiar. "Fawkes? Could you bring Harry and Ginny back now?"

Fawkes looked at him and trilled a little before turning his head and working to straighten feathers on his left wing.

"Well?" Molly demanded.

Dumbledore sighed. "He gave me a very neutral response, as if saying that everything is how it should be. Fawkes, could you take me down there?"

The bird appeared to shake his head.

"Definitely negative feelings on that question, and a little amusement," Dumbledore said as he examined his familiar carefully for more of an answer.

Fawkes trilled again.

"And?" Molly asked.

"He's feeling hungry," Dumbledore said in a puzzled tone.

"Oh, Ginny also said to send some food down, that she hasn't eaten since breakfast," Ron told them. "Sorry, I had forgotten."

"That we can fix. Beaker?"

An elf popped in. "Yes, Headmaster?"

"Beaker, I need you to fix a very large meal for a pair of students, something that won't spoil over a few hours, and some equally large container of drink. Oh, please put it all in a picnic basket with a handle, too," Dumbledore instructed the elf.

"Yes, Headmaster," Beaker said and popped out.

"Albus, I want Ginny returned now," the woman insisted.

"Molly, I don't know how to get to them if Fawkes won't take me or retrieve them. I can't make him go," he said overly patiently.

"What about the way Ron got there, through the loo?" she asked.

Dumbledore looked at Ron. "Did the hole stay open, Mr Weasley?"

"I don't know. Harry was the last one through. But even if it was, there's still the problem with the rocks," Ron pointed out.

Dumbledore chuckled. "I think I can deal with the rocks. Which facility was it again?"

"The girl's loo on the second floor, the one near the messages on the wall," Ron reminded him.

"Which would be why I'm unfamiliar with it," he said with a grin that reached his eyes. He looked at the parents. "If you would take your son to the hospital wing, Minerva and I can examine the room in question."

Molly looked at her husband intently. He acquiesced with a nod. "I'm coming, too. Arthur will see our son to the nurse."

"Very well, as soon as..."

Beaker the elf popped in with a basket that was nearly as large as he was.

"Thank you, Beaker." When the Headmaster took the basket, the elf bowed and popped out. Albus turned to his familiar. "Fawkes, would you be so kind, even if you are being somewhat mysterious about this?"

Fawkes trilled and glided down from his perch. His talons had barely grabbed the basket handle when he flashed out. "He is entirely too pleased with himself. I fear he must be up to something," Dumbledore said quietly as he stood. "As I was saying before, as soon as the food is sent down, we can go. Since the food has gone, it is now our turn." He started for the door with the two women following him.

It did not take long for the trio to reach the room in question. Molly gasped when she saw the message on the wall. Dumbledore thought she was being overly dramatic, since they knew Miss Weasley was perfectly safe now, but then Molly had always been a bit that way, even when she was a student.

Walking into the bathroom, he looked around and quickly saw there was no hole in the floor. The sinks looked like they were where they should be. "Minerva? Does everything look correct to you in here?"

"Yes, Albus. The sinks are in their proper place," McGonagall replied.

Dumbledore pulled out his wand and cast several spells at them. They tested positive for magic, but there was so much there and it was so strong, it would take him weeks to figure it all out -- perhaps it would be a fun project to explore over the summer. He put his wand away.

"Well?" Molly asked, sounding almost like a little girl about to have a tantrum.

"While I could break the charms on it, it would take weeks and Fawkes will bring them out far faster. We shall have to wait," he told her.

"I want my daughter," she said very firmly.

He held out his hand towards the sinks, welcoming her to them. "Be

my guest, as long as you are careful that nothing you do brings the ceiling down on them, causing them to be buried alive."

Molly froze, her wand half out. "What do you mean?"

"Your son has already told us of one cave-in, which implies that the ceiling down there is not completely stable," he said calmly. "All of this," his hand swept around the room, "we must assume is attached to their ceiling. If you make a big enough disturbance here, it will have an effect down there. Therefore, I will not blast the sinks out of the way for fear of harming them, especially when we consider that they will be returned sometime soon anyway. The only way to safely open the entrance is to undo the charms. I found no less than nine wards and charms on the area, and that was only a quick survey." Dumbledore then fixed her with a stern glare. "While one of the students down there is your child, the other is not. Therefore, whatever you do, you are not allowed to put them in danger."

Molly hung her head and put her wand back, recognizing defeat.

"My suggestion to you would be to go visit your son in the hospital wing. Once you are assured of his wellbeing, you might want to return home and try to get a good night's sleep. I promise that one of us will contact you as soon as Harry and Ginny return, whether that is one hour or one day from now." He held her gaze and waited for her answer.

"Very well," she said and started to leave. At the doorway she stopped and looked back. "I'll return first thing in the morning," then she left.

"I don't recall her being quite that head-strong when in school," Dumbledore commented as they slowly started to walk out.

"I believe she was, but I don't recall it being displayed very often. Perhaps it's because this concerns her youngest, her only girl,"

McGonagall theorized.

"Perhaps," he vaguely agreed before he brightened. "Well, now that the mystery surrounding the Chamber of Secrets has been solved, school can finish normally."

"Normalcy seems so boring until you don't have it; then you yearn for it," she said.

"True, true. Would you like to make a small wager of a bottle of Scotch on when Fawkes will bring them back?"

She chuckled. "With you having inside information? I think not."

"Fawkes would not say except for the idea of it being tomorrow, as young Mr Weasley implied."

There was a long pause before she said, "I believe around lunch time, give or take an hour."

Dumbledore smiled. "I find you optimistic and believe it will be near dinner."

"I shall let you deal with Molly if you are correct," she told him with a grin she used only in private.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Actually, I think I shall avoid her too, at least until our wayward students return. Then we will let them deal with her."

((A/N: There you go, Ginny is indeed the second girl, as some have guessed. She will add some "spice" to Harry's life. We finish the second year in the next chapter, which will explain why Ginny was watching Harry and Hermione, and Hermione will be revived and have a reaction to Ginny.))

Chapter 7 - Secrets

"Well, I suppose I should start with what I know about this bond we have now," Harry told Ginny as they laid on the Cushioning charm like a mattress in the ante-chamber of the Chamber of Secrets.

"OK," she agreed happily as she snuggled at his side.

"In some ways, there's not much to it. We'll feel very uncomfortable if we're not touching for the next twenty-four hours or so. We can move apart if we need to, but you'll feel like you have to get back to me as soon as you can, and the same for me."

"I experienced that when I had to go talk to Ron. And when that time is over, I suppose the bond's finished doing, err, whatever it's doing? That we'll be able to separate and act normal if we're not touching?" she asked to make sure she understood.

"Right, both times. You'll also find that when we're apart, if you think about me very hard, you'll be able to know where I am, as if you could go there; and you'll know if I'm OK or not. Hermione found out earlier this year that when my arm was broken in the Quidditch game, she knew I had been hurt. She didn't feel like her arm was broken or anything, she said that she wasn't sure how I was hurt or how bad I was hurt, only that I was injured."

Ginny nodded. "So that's all?"

"Oh, you'll also find that we're very protective of each other. That's been a real problem with Malfoy, since he likes to insult Hermione, but she says that his insults don't bother her because the word Mudblood is meaningless. I've managed to hold my temper around him, but one of these days, I'll probably lose it and he's going to pay dearly," Harry told her with a little heat in his voice.

"This isn't going to be good," she said with dread. "I mean, I live up to

the reputation of redheads and can get very angry. I'm the youngest, but my brothers know not to get me angry."

Harry chuckled. "I guess we'll have to work on that. There's something I don't know now, though. I don't know how things will work between you and Hermione. Will you be able sense the other like you can sense me? And then there's the question of what she's going to think when she wakes up and finds you're bonded to me like she is."

Ginny turned her face down into his chest to hide. "I'm so sorry, Harry. I really didn't mean to do this. I didn't mean to cause trouble between you and Hermione."

Harry pulled her in tightly to give her a hug. "It's all right, Ginny. I know you didn't mean to. Riddle told me he tricked you. It's not your fault."

"I should have known better. Normal books don't write back. I don't remember much of anything, but I feel so guilty because I know I was the one responsible for all of the bad things that happened," she said, and Harry could hear her start to cry softly.

He squeezed her in another hug for a moment. "It's OK, Ginny."

After a few minutes of sobbing, she sniffled before she started to talk again. "I was fine as long as I didn't think about everything I had done. Touching you feels so good I could ignore it, but I know I did bad things."

Harry patted her back and hoped that helped her. "It'll be all right, Ginny. I wouldn't have known any better. I even had it for a few days, before it disappeared."

Ginny nodded on his shoulder. "When I saw you with it, it frightened me because Tom kept asking about you. I'm sorry I got into your

book bag, but I took it back to protect you."

"Thanks." He pulled his hand out from hers and moved the hair back from her face so he could see her better. She turned her face up and tentatively smiled at him. "There, that's better," he said with a smile back.

Fawkes took that moment to flash in and set a picnic basket down.

"Thank you, Fawkes," Ginny gushed, making a fuss over him, glad for a different subject to talk about. He trilled for a moment, giving them yet another happy feeling. He also made himself comfortable and stayed with them.

They dug into the picnic basket and started eating. There were even some pitchers with tops that had water in them. They ate a little slowly because they kept holding hands, but they managed to eat their fill anyway. They did not talk about anything important, mostly about foods they liked or disliked. Harry determined he was going to have to introduce her to some Muggle foods.

When they were done eating, they set the basket aside and lay back down. Fawkes stayed with them, resting on the bare rock and appearing to go to sleep.

"You said we should talk to learn about each other?" Ginny asked as she snuggled up next to him again, slipping her hand up under his shirt and resting it on his bare stomach. He only squirmed a little at first.

"Yeah. I can go first," Harry volunteered. One part of him was amused that he was comfortable with her touching him like that, but he knew the automatic trust was an artefact from the bond.

He started telling about how he was orphaned and taken to the Dursleys, what life was like there for his ten years before Hogwarts,

and what it was like living with the Grangers now. His voice became thick as he described how they had given him a real home where he felt love for the first time. While he had not cried, he had to wipe his eyes when he was done.

Ginny gave him a tight hug when he was done. "I'm so sorry, Harry. I think everyone imagines you stayed with some nice wizarding family and never really thought that life might not be so nice for you."

Harry snorted. "Yeah, like Snape. He seems to think I was raised like Malfoy was," he said nastily.

"Ignore him, Harry, he's just a greasy git. I don't think he likes anyone, not even his own Slytherins, and I think he only tolerates them. I pity him most of the time," she told him.

"Maybe. I haven't found out what it is yet, but there's something about me he really hates, more than the average person. He's been a lot better by ignoring us since we complained about him, but he still gives me these deliberate looks, and I can tell they mean that he hates me."

"We can keep our eyes open."

"What about you, Ginny?" he asked curiously. He knew some about the Weasleys because Ron had told him, but Ron had not shared all that much.

Ginny sighed. "Where to begin... You know there are seven children in our family, right?"

"Right."

"Because I'm the youngest, I'm treated like the baby of the family. My bigger brothers have done a lot of the looking after me, which is probably good."

Harry gave her a questioning look, but she ignored it and went on.

"We're probably considered one of the more famous of the 'Light' families, even if we don't have very much. My parents have always followed whatever Dumbledore wants. That's been mostly good, but after hearing your story, I'm not so sure about that anymore," she admitted.

"I've thought about it a lot and I've decided not to get too upset about it," he told her. "I mean, I can't change the past. I can be careful around him, though, and I intend to. It took me a while to see that everyone makes mistakes. You know, like the saying that no one is perfect?"

"I guess that makes sense." She sighed. "I wish my parents would be more cautious around Dumbledore. Let's see... Uh, My favourite colour is emerald green," she said with a blush. "I don't like pink because I think it clashes with my hair. My birthday is eleven days after yours, on the eleventh of August; so I won't be twelve until this summer. I like animals and I used to have a cat, but it died last year. That made the year I was home alone even more lonely."

"I'm sorry," he told her and gave her another squeeze for a hug.

"Thanks," she told him with a smile. "Um, other than trimming the ends to make it straight, I haven't cut my hair since I was four."

Harry's hand that was around her back picked up a handful of her hair for a moment. "It's very pretty, and very soft, too."

She blushed a little. "Thanks." She went quiet for a moment. "Harry?" she said very quietly and shyly.

"Um-hmm?" He was still slowly running his fingers through her hair.

"What you told me about the Dursleys, that was one of your secrets, wasn't it? I mean, I haven't heard you ever say anything like that, and there have never been any rumours that you were raised that way."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Yes, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone. Only Hermione and her parents know all the details."

"I won't, I promise," she assured him fervently. She paused for a moment more. "If I tell you my secrets, do you promise not to tell anyone?"

"What about Hermione?"

"You can tell her, I guess. She's part of you -- or us I guess -- and she already knows the first one anyway."

Harry stopped playing with her hair, surprised. "You've already shared secrets with her?"

"It was 'girl talk', Harry," she said with a faint giggle. "You should know that I've had a crush on you since, well, since I was a little girl. You were like the knight in shining armour in all the fairy tales. I think a lot of girls my age felt that way, but I think I had it worse. That's why I couldn't act normal around you last summer or during this year." She turned her face into his chest again.

Harry thought about that for a moment, and then he started to chuckle.

"What?" she asked, a little angry. "Why are you making fun of me?"

He stopped laughing immediately and was contrite. "I'm sorry, Ginny. I'm really not making fun of you. It's just, well, I find it funny that anyone would think of me that way. To me, I'm only Harry. I'll admit I was kind of put out when I started school here and everyone was

pointing at me. I still think a lot of people look at my scar before they really look at me." He shrugged slightly. He looked back down at her for a moment and saw that she looked like she accepted that answer. "Besides, I noticed something was different about you and asked Hermione. She told me you probably had a crush on me."

Ginny growled, "She told!"

"What? Oh, no, no," he quickly assured her. "I'm sure it was before you probably told her anyway. Hermione doesn't tattle about secrets."

Ginny calmed down. "Oh. OK. I guess I didn't really tell her I had a crush, but I did ask things about you that I know she would have taken to understand that I was crushing on you."

"I hope you're not upset, but I still find that funny," he told her, watching her reaction.

"I guess not, now that you explain it. I mean, I'd probably find it funny too if everyone treated me like a heroine." She giggled.

"Yeah, and here you are bonded to your hero," he chuckled, but she was very silent. "Ginny?"

Ginny lightly moved her fingers and nervously caressed his stomach. "My other secret is not so innocent. In fact, I'm not even sure how to tell you."

"Just tell me," he encouraged her. "It can't be worse than what I went through."

"In a way it is," she said, almost sadly. "I mean, every family has dirty laundry they don't show. For you, it's how your relatives treated you. I'm sure Hermione has something too."

"Err, I can't think of any. I know Emma can't have any more children due to an accident, but that's nothing like my story."

"No," she said quietly. "That's not scary, or even embarrassing ... or shameful." She buried her face in his chest again.

"Just tell me," he repeated. "I'll still be here for you, like I am after you told me you had a crush on me."

She moved her hand up on his chest so her hand and entire forearm rested on his skin. "I suppose I should thank you for bonding me to you. You've given me a gift I can never repay, although I'll gladly spend a lifetime with you trying. You've saved me twice today."

"What do you mean? Don't you realize that I've actually hurt you? I've taken away your choice in life," he said with some anguish.

Ginny chuckled. "I know, and that's what's so great. Magical bonds are always for life. Didn't you know that?"

"I guess we assumed that would be true. But I don't understand why that makes you happy."

"Because that's one indication of marriage, Harry. I'm now your wife, or really your second wife, although it might be better to marry Hermione publicly and I'll be your mistress. That's still done in the Wizarding world," she went on, not able to look at him.

Harry's brain was on overload. "Uh, err, um, what? M-Married?"

"Sure, didn't you know that? It's one of the basic Wizarding traditions and laws, just like the ones about Life Debts. Don't forget that since I, or my family really, owe you a Life Debt for risking your life to save me, you can ask for anything up to and including my life. If you do, my father is practically obligated to hand me over as yours. So in a way," she giggled, "I'm doubly yours."

Harry was still wide-eyed, trying to process this new and astounding information.

"But don't worry, like I said, Hermione can be your wife. I'll work with her since she was bonded to you first. I'm really, really grateful for this," she assured him.

Harry breathed very deeply a couple of times as images of trolls, basilisks, and two girls ran around in his head. "OK," he finally got out. "We can come back to that later, but tell me why you see this as good. You're only eleven going on twelve, Ginny. I know I'm not ready for marriage yet."

It was Ginny's turn to breathe deeply and slowly let it out. "This is the family's dirty little secret. My mother is not normal. I don't mean that she's part troll, or part giant, or something like that; I mean that she's not like a normal mother. You see, she's really controlling, and I mean more controlling than you can probably imagine."

"I don't know, I can imagine a lot after living with my aunt and uncle," Harry said a little doubtfully.

"Harry, my mother throws adult-sized temper-tantrums when she doesn't get her way. For someone like Mrs Granger or your aunt, that might not be a big deal. But for someone who knows magic, well, it's why the Wizarding World is so messed up."

"Ah," Harry drawled. "To use my uncle as an example, when someone has a lot of power and then goes bad, then bad things become really bad or beyond bad."

"Exactly," she agreed. "For example, my mother has this funny story where she jokes about using a love potion on my father to get him to love her and then marry her. She denies she really did it and makes it sound like that she wondered if she was going to have to so he would

notice her. She goes on to tell that he did notice her before they finished Hogwarts; therefore, she didn't have to do anything drastic. She makes the story sound really funny, throws in things that happened as they began to notice each other and makes you laugh, that sort of thing. But as I've gotten older, I've noticed things about the story that make me think she's not really joking. I think she really did it."

"OK," he said slowly, "but that's only one story."

She exhaled suddenly, almost snorting. "Didn't you notice how she got after the twins when you were visiting last summer? She was on her best behaviour while you were there, but I was still embarrassed by what she did."

"The twins do act up a lot, but I suppose I can see what you're saying," he said slowly, trying to think back. "The punishment was a bit extreme, but I assumed it was because there was something else going on that I didn't know about."

"The twins act that way for a reason, but perhaps I should explain all of my brothers so you'll understand," she told him. "First, there's Bill. Before he finished Hogwarts, he had secured a job with Gringotts, in their Egyptian office. When he arrived at King's Cross after his seventh year, he gave each of us a hug, told us all good-bye, and Apparated straight to Gringotts to start work. He didn't even come home for dinner and to spend the night."

"Wow!"

"My second oldest brother is Charlie. I think he started realizing what was going on in his fifth year. He had always liked animals, like me, but he seemed to become fanatical about them overnight. He did come home from school, but left before breakfast the next morning for Romania to work on a dragon preserve. Both he and Bill only come home for one or two days at Christmas, every other year."

"But that's only two brothers," he pointed out.

"Next is Percy. I assume you've noticed that he acts like he has a broom stuck up his arse instead of flying it?" She smiled when Harry laughed and nodded. "It's my opinion he acts that way to rebel, and he'll use his rebellion to do something really dramatic with my parents as soon as possible after finishing school so he can leave home. I really think he should be in Slytherin, and he probably would have been if Slytherin didn't have its present reputation."

"And I assume you'll tell me the twins pranking everybody is their way of rebelling?" he prompted.

"Exactly. They know it drives my mother up the wall and they continue to do it anyway -- despite her wrath, which is truly scary. I honestly believe they will either join Zonko's, or else start their own joke shop like Zonko's, and live in it as soon as possible after seventh year."

"It still seems a little outlandish, but I suppose no more so than my messed up relatives. What about Ron? Is he rebelling in a way I don't see?"

"Hardly," she said with some disgust. "Ron's too thick to see the pattern. He's also ruled by his stomach, and I'll admit that my mother can cook as well as any house-elf. As long as he's fed and she does his laundry, I don't think Ron will complain much less rebel. At least not before thirty," she added with a chuckle. "I could see him living at home for many years to come. Ron is the exception."

"And then there's you..."

"Yeah, and then there's me. I first noticed this when Charlie left home two years ago. I thought a lot about our family last year when I was alone, and having to deal with Mum by myself. It's so obvious now

that she's trying to make me into someone just like her." She growled. "It's so frustrating at times, at least when it's not sickening. So you see, Harry, by being bonded to you, it gives me the best possible excuse to escape, and sooner than I would have been able to otherwise."

"Except that we're trying to keep it secret for as long as possible."

"I understand, but that will only work for a few years. Eventually, it will come out. People will notice how you act around us, or we around you. People can be stupid, but strange things get their attention and usually when you least want it." She suddenly brightened. "But when it does come out, I can use that to force my escape and come and stay with you. Then I can be like Bill and Charlie, visiting for a day every other year."

"All right, so your family is not the nice family everyone thinks it is. That doesn't sound so bad."

Ginny shook her head a little. "I guess I'm going to have to admit it." She took another deep breath. "My plan to escape the insanity that is my mother was to watch you for a few years to find out what you were like and what you liked, and then slowly change myself to be like that. Then, in your fourth or fifth year when you started to notice girls, I'd get your attention somehow and try to become your girlfriend." She paused for a moment, working up her courage. "Once I was your girlfriend, I would have done anything to keep you so you would marry me later and I could easily escape home. I really do mean anything, including things that are shameful. That's how bad I want to escape."

Harry quietly considered what she said. He was not totally sure what she meant by 'doing anything', but he could guess. "But what if I didn't make you my girlfriend? What if I had ignored you because I didn't like what I saw in you?" He felt her warm breath on his chest through his shirt as she exhaled deeply.

"I would have kept trying to get your attention."

"And if that wasn't enough?" He kept pushing, wanting to know how far she would have gone.

"Eventually, I would have given up," she quietly admitted. "I wouldn't have used a love potion, if that's what you're asking. I'd be willing to do what my Mum tells me are shameful things if you're not married, but I wouldn't try to warp your magic. I might hurt myself, but I could never hurt you," she ended in a whisper.

"So I would have always had a choice in choosing you or not?"

"Yes."

"Then that doesn't sound so bad," he told her. "I understand wanting to escape, and being willing to do almost anything. I had hundreds of ways of escaping my relatives, but I never did them because most of those ways would have hurt or killed them. I don't like them, but I still wouldn't hurt them. So why couldn't you do what Bill and Charlie did and just leave when you finished school?"

Ginny shook her head against his chest. "You're forgetting about the customs for girls and how my mother would react."

"More like I probably don't know them," he grumbled. "Please explain it."

"I'm sure you've started to see how many things benefit men more than woman in our society?"

"Yeah, at least some," he softly said."

"In the same way that men have more power, woman are punished more when they do things wrong. For example, while frowned up on

in polite society, there are almost no consequences for a man having a mistress; but if a woman has a child without being married, she'd probably have to leave Britain to have a good enough reputation to ever be able to marry."

"But that's not fair," Harry protested.

"Yeah, tell me something I don't know," she grumbled sarcastically. "More importantly for me, there's also the tradition that girls don't leave home before getting married. If they do, it becomes a lot harder to get married, especially for us Pureblood witches. We get treated like damaged goods. That means I can't just Apparate away like Bill or Charlie did. I have to have not only a fiancé the day I turn seventeen in order to leave home, but he has to be a good one so my parents will accept it for real. So my mother wouldn't..." she paused for a moment, unable to look up at him. "My mother would enforce that I stay at home and she'd have no fears about doing anything to make it happen. She's quite good at Potions. I'm reasonably sure she gave a potion to my father and she's seen what the rest of my brothers have done or will do to escape. Therefore, I could believe she'd give me something to make me stay at home."

"But..."

"I know, who wants to think your own mother would dose you with a potion to control you? I'd like to hope she wouldn't, but I know she's capable of it. So my answer was to get myself a good fiancé and you were my first choice. Do you understand now?" Ginny held her breath for moment, hoping she had not destroyed a new relationship with him.

"I do and I'm sorry for you." He gave her a squeeze around the shoulders.

"Thank you, Harry!" she said brightly and leaned up and quickly kissed his cheek before snuggling back down on his shoulder, happy

that he did not hate her.

He was glad she was not looking at his face, as he felt very hot and knew he was blushing deeply. "What about your father?" he asked, still not sure he could fully believe everything she said. He knew that the bond made them trust each other, which he thought would make her more honest, but in many ways, what she had described really was not all that much stranger than his situation had been.

Ginny's hand started to move a little on his chest, her voice happier than a few minutes ago. "My dad is great and I wouldn't trade him for anyone. I feel sorry for him being with my mother. I'm sure it's why he built the shed and spends so much time puttering around out there. It's a great place for him to escape when things get too bad." She sighed wistfully.

"He's pretty special and I love him to death." She giggled a little. "While he normally lets her run the house, if things get too bad, I can go to him and he will usually step in and make it all better."

"You have him wrapped around your little finger?" he asked with a grin.

"Yep," she admitted happily. "As he should be." They both laughed, happy to be past the worst part.

"So," Harry started and then paused. "We're married. Are you sure about that?"

"I think so, or at least magically, which is not quite the same as legally. If you wanted to reveal the secret, you could go to the Ministry and we could register as a bonded couple, or trio. We'd be considered adults in the magical world, so the underage magic laws would no longer apply and we could apply for an Apparation license, as well as some other things. Or at least that's how I understand it."

"But how would they know we're bonded?" He could not work that one out.

"Oh, I've heard there's a spell for that," she explained. "They cast it when you register as a bonded couple to verify."

"But that would mean that if anyone did that spell on us, it should show, wouldn't it?" he asked a little worriedly.

She thought about that for a moment. "Yeah, I guess it would. You're worried about Dumbledore casting the spell, aren't you?"

"I suppose, although I think Madam Pomfrey might be the first to find out," he theorized.

After a moment, she asked, "Would it really be bad if they did find out?"

"Probably not them. Hermione and I have talked about this. I've never been treated normally, so this would be just one more thing where I'm not normal, like talking to snakes. No, the people we're most worried about are her parents. We just don't want to disappoint them and make them think badly of the magical world and us," he explained.

She slowly nodded. "Yeah, my parents would freak too, which would make the idea of leaving look even better."

They laid there for a few minutes in silence.

"I really am getting tired. I think we should sleep," he suggested.

"OK. You should probably recast the Cushioning charm. I'd prefer not to be sleeping on it when it stops. That could hurt." She giggled and he laughed.

They got up and Harry ended the present charm and cast a new one. They laid back down in the same position, except this time, Fawkes came over and laid next to Harry, stretching his long neck so his head laid on Ginny's arm.

Harry smiled and petted the bird for a moment. "Good night, Fawkes. Good night, Ginny."

"Good night, Harry, Fawkes."

Fawkes gave a low guttural trill for a moment. Both students shuddered at the pleasure they felt and quickly fell blissfully asleep.

Albus Dumbledore pulled out his pocket watch and checked it. It showed a little after three in the afternoon. He put it away with a very slight smile. That bottle of Scotch might be his yet. Currently, he and his Deputy were in the hospital wing with Professors Sprout and Snape. Madam Pomfrey had the restorative potion and was about to apply it. He was feeling good about being here, as it meant the students were about to be returned to normal. Better still, he was away from Molly Weasley. The Weasley matron was sitting in his office, very anxiously awaiting his familiar's return with her daughter.

Colin Creevey had been awakened and seemed to be doing fine, except for some disorientation. Justin Finch-Fletchley was next and was the same. Madam Pomfrey had then revived Penelope Clearwater without problems. Last was Hermione Granger. She seemed to have a headache, but that did not seem to be a cause for alarm; she might have had one when she was petrified.

Dumbledore felt relieved to see all of the students revived and apparently normal. He was about to say that to Minerva when a flash of light lit the room and the sound of running feet grabbed everyone's attention. When he turned back around, he saw Mr Potter hugging

Miss Granger as if she had been gone for years, not three weeks.

"Why has..."

Minerva interrupted him. "He's spent nearly every free minute in here by her bed." She pointed to the small desk near Granger's bed. "It was really very touching."

Albus frowned. That was very unusual for a twelve year-old boy, and even more so for Harry, given what he knew about his life with his aunt. Then again, maybe his past life spurred this hyper-feeling. Of course, it appeared that Miss Granger was returning the feelings in her hug. He wondered if there was more there than met the eye.

"I suppose I should go find Molly and tell her that her daughter has returned," Minerva said unenthusiastically.

Dumbledore turned and saw Ginny for the first time since he had left the school. He noted that she was avidly watching Harry and Hermione hug, as if she wanted to join them. Most curious, he thought. It was time to intervene, so he walked over.

"Mr Potter, welcome back. You have been sorely missed."

"Headmaster," Harry addressed him, turning in Hermione's grasp so they were sitting side-by-side on the bed with their arms around each other.

Dumbledore gave his best genial smile. "Could you please enlighten us on what happened since yesterday afternoon? Mr Weasley has told us a little, but none of what happened in the Chamber of Secrets."

Harry looked wildly around. "Here? In front of everyone?"

"Are you afraid of everyone finding out there was really nothing to be

done?" drawled the voice Harry hated most.

"No, Professor," Harry said boldly and only because Dumbledore was right there. "I don't want to be put on more of a pedestal than I already am. Contrary to what you think, I don't like fame."

"You have a point, Harry," Dumbledore quickly said, preventing a reply from Snape. "Why don't we head to my office? I believe Miss Weasley's parents are there as well." He saw Ginny cringe and wondered why. He supposed she was feeling embarrassed for what had happened.

"Err, sure." Harry stood and helped Hermione up.

"Mr Potter," Madam Pomfrey called and stepped forward. "Miss Granger will need to stay here so I can ensure she is healthy."

He turned to look at his best friend. "Do you feel healthy?"

"I do. Let's go, Harry," Hermione said and started to walk forward.

"Miss Granger!"

"Poppy," Dumbledore intervened. "I shall watch over her and send her back at the slightest problem. She will also return for a check-up as soon as she is able. That should give you time to attend to the others first."

"Thank you, Headmaster," Hermione said with a smile. Holding Harry's hand, she led them over to Ginny. She leaned over and whispered in the redhead's ear. "Harry told me and we'll talk about this later."

Ginny nodded and looked down for a second before looking back up at Hermione. "Can I? Please? It would make me feel better." At Hermione's nod, Ginny grinned and stepped around them and

grabbed Harry's other hand. The three started walking out and Fawkes flew over and landed on Harry's shoulder, riding with him.

Albus raised a shaggy eyebrow at Minerva, who slowly shook her head.

"I have no idea," she quietly said before she followed them.

Albus brought up the rear. He was not sure if he was more surprised by the trio of students or the behaviour of his familiar.

At the entrance to his office, the students waited. Albus gave the password and let the group up. When he opened his door, he instantly got an earful.

"Albus, it's late afternoon and they still aren't back!"

Dumbledore gave his grandfatherly smile and calmly said, "You're in luck, Molly, I've found them." He stepped into the room, heading for his desk. As he moved, the students became visible and he watched Molly run to her daughter.

"Ginny!"

Fawkes actually squawked and flew over to his perch to avoid the woman's charge.

Ginny braced herself and did not let go of Harry's hand. Her mother wrapped her in a hug that almost felt good, except that her mother squeezed too hard. She had tried to tell her once, but her mother ignored her. Now, she just held her breath to try and keep from being hurt, but it was getting hard to hold out.

"Mrs Weasley!" Harry shouted.

The woman let go of Ginny, who took a deep breath with relief.

"Oh, Harry. Thank you!" She engulfed him in a hug too.

Hermione was faster to stop the problem. "Mrs Weasley! You're hurting him."

Molly let go and looked over. "Hermione, it's good to see you up dear."

"Don't you know that you hurt them when you hug like that?" Hermione asked, not willing to let go of the problem.

"Nonsense..."

"Actually, Mrs Weasley, it did hurt," Harry said. "You've been hurting Ginny for years, too. She told me today."

Molly looked scandalized. Arthur looked at the children with relief at seeing them again.

"If everyone would please take a seat?" Dumbledore jumped in, saving Harry and Hermione from whatever Molly had been about to say.

The trio squeezed into one of the small couches, while the adults each took a chair.

"Ginny, dear, why don't you come over here and sit in my lap," her mother suggested.

"No thank you, I'm fine here," she said, trying to sound pleasant and upbeat, despite the fact that her heart was racing. She was starting to understand the protectiveness due to the bond that Harry had explained and it was warring with the fear of her mother. If her mother attacked Harry in any way, allowing the protectiveness and her temper to win, there would be a meltdown, she was sure. She

had to control her temper.

"But..."

"I'm sure she'll be fine where she is," Dumbledore smoothly stepped in again. "Mr Potter, I believe you have a story for us?"

"Err, yes, sir. Uh, Ron told you about everything up to the ceiling falling down, didn't he?" Harry really did not want to have to discuss forcing Lockhart to come with them.

"He did. Why don't you start from where he told you to carry on?" Dumbledore suggested.

"Right. Well, I found another door and opened it. That led into the Chamber of Secrets itself. It was about the size of the Great Hall, but with lots of columns to hold it up. I, uh, I found Ginny, but it was like she was asleep. When I tried to wake her, uh, I guess a person showed up."

"You guess?" Dumbledore asked. Everyone was listening closely.

"He looked like a ghost but was a little more solid. He said he was a memory, the memory of a boy called Tom Riddle. He said he was sixteen, almost seventeen, I think."

Dumbledore was sure he was going to have a heart attack. He carefully asked, "Are you sure about his name, Harry?"

"Yes, that was the name on the diary, too." Dumbledore looked at him sharply but did not interrupt for the moment. "The diary was controlling Ginny and making her do everything." He looked at her as she looked at her shoes. "She really doesn't have much of a memory of when those things happened, so she can't really be blamed. It's not her fault."

"No," Dumbledore said slowly, "if she was possessed, she is not to blame." He looked at the girl. "Miss Weasley, where did this ... diary ... come from, and do you know what it was doing to you?"

"I found this diary in with my school books when we bought them last summer. When I first wrote in it, he was nice. Then he tricked me into continue writing in the diary. He somehow possessed me after that. At first, I just thought it was cool to have a diary that talked back to me," she confessed in a small voice.

"Ginny!" said Mr Weasley, flabbergasted. "Haven't I taught you anything? What have I always told you? Never trust anything that can think for itself if you can't see where it keeps its brain. Why didn't you show the diary to me, or your mother? A suspicious object like that, it was clearly full of Dark Magic!"

"I didn't know," Ginny said, just short of crying. "I found it inside one of the books Mum got me. I thought someone had just left it in there and forgotten about it or she gave it to me."

"Here's the book," Harry said, pulling it out of a pocket in his robes, robes which would need to be replaced.

Dumbledore looked at the object, a large hole in the middle and a black stain covering it. His glasses helped him to see residual magic on it, but there was not enough to hurt anyone.

"We think she got it in the bookstore, and we think Mr Malfoy gave it to her, but we can't be sure," Harry said, guessing a bit.

"I knew he couldn't be trusted," Arthur said.

"That is a very grave accusation, Harry. Of course, Lucius Malfoy was here yesterday and he was acting very strangely, even for him." Dumbledore chuckled. "He even permanently sent his house-elf away, which is very unlike him."

Hermione gasped. "What was his name, Headmaster? The house-elf, I mean."

"His name is Dobby. Why?"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other and then nodded. "It must have been Malfoy," Harry told them. "Dobby visited me several times trying to get me to stay away from Hogwarts. He said bad things were coming and but he couldn't tell me what because his family would hurt him even more than they already did."

"Dobby was also happy to be free," McGonagall added. "Albus, we may have a deranged house-elf running around."

"Perhaps," Dumbledore cordially agreed, "but that can be pursued later. Harry, after you found Miss Weasley, what happened next?"

"Riddle and I talked for a bit." Harry was not sure about saying this, but decided to. "He told me how he changed his name to 'Lord Voldemort'." Mrs Weasley gasped and gave a small yelp, while Mr Weasley squirmed and looked uncomfortable. It was interesting that no one else reacted -- not McGonagall, Dumbledore, or his two girls.

"Yes, that is how he is known nowadays," Dumbledore admitted.

"Well, after that, he tried to kill me by sending the Basilisk after me." Harry was sure Ron would have mentioned that, so he was amused to see Mrs Weasley bury her face in her hands. "I managed to hide from it by running around the columns and eventually I tricked it into biting the diary instead of me, because I thought the book was the key. Everything kept coming back to the book."

"That was very good reasoning, Harry," Hermione complimented him.

"Thanks!" he beamed at her.

"And then?" Dumbledore prompted, wanting to find out what happened to the snake. He had no idea how Harry would have killed it.

"When the snake bit the book, Riddle's shade and his binding control over the snake went away. So I woke Ginny up and made sure she was all right. Other than being as tired as I was, she was fine," he told them.

"And the Basilisk?"

"Oh, we had a good conversation. Sheba was created by Salazar Slytherin to be a defender of the school, so we made a bargain. I cleared the rocks from her tunnel and she promised to resume being the defender. She had been bound by Riddle fifty years ago, so the diary was still controlling her. Once the diary was destroyed, she became normal again. Last I saw, she was heading up her special tunnel into the forest to feed on the giant spiders," Harry said happily.

"You did what?" McGonagall asked incredulously. "Did you say you let it out into the forest?"

"Sure," Harry said casually. "She won't hurt any of us. She's nice and it's her job to protect us. She just needed out to get food so she didn't have to hibernate so much."

McGonagall shook her head. "He sounds just like Hagrid."

"Thanks!" Harry said, proud to be like his giant friend. That comment caused McGonagall to shake her head some more.

"I take it that you then returned to try to get to your friend, Ron?"

"Yes, sir. We didn't have much luck, and it tired me out that much more. Ginny says I got so tired I fell asleep, but I don't remember too

much," Harry said, looking at Ginny.

Dumbledore detected a hint of untruthfulness in that statement, but he decided not to challenge it.

"Why didn't you come up immediately?" Molly asked. "We were all so worried for you."

"Harry was really tired and needed to rest. I was tired, too," Ginny tried to explain.

"You could have rested up here where we could have watched out for you," Molly persisted.

"We also talked about what happened after I woke up and I think it was good for both of us," Harry said, looking at her. "That was something we couldn't have done if Ginny had come up while I was still down there."

Molly huffed. "Well, you're here now." She fixed her daughter with a stare. "Ginny, go pack your things, you're coming home with me. I don't believe you'll miss anything important in the last four weeks of your first year."

"I'm sorry, but I can't. I need to stay here," Ginny said very quietly, but there was no doubt she was heard.

"Ginevra Molly Weasley! You will not talk to me like that! You will come home today!" She glared daggers at her daughter.

The real Molly was making herself visible and Harry suddenly understood everything that Ginny had been trying to tell him in the last day.

"I'm sorry, but I have something to do here and I'll come home on the train like normal," she said weakly. It took every ounce of willpower to

say that.

"Ginny!" her mother growled until a hand clamped down on her arm.

"Ginny," her father said calmly, but not in his usual happy nature. "Why do you feel it's so important to stay here?"

She looked at him and smiled a little. He always came through when it mattered most. "Because I have to face everyone. Everyone knows it was me down there, and there will be rumours. I have to face them and stop them now. If I leave, then the rumours will grow over the summer and I'll never live it down. I have to do this now."

"Couldn't you come home tomorrow, after you've dealt with the rumours?" he asked, his knuckles white on his wife's arm.

"No, Dad. It will take a few weeks and then school will be over anyway. Also," she looked to Harry who smiled at her, "I need to be here where I can talk to people who understand me and what I went through."

"What? You don't think your own mother can understand you?" Molly huffed, despite the hand that was trying to restrain her.

"Only if you can tell me about the Chamber of Secrets, and tell me what it's like to face Voldemort." The gasp and look of fear on her mother's face emboldened her. "Only if you can tell me what it's like to face a forty foot snake." She looked at Harry again. "I only know one person who can say all of that, and he'll be here at the school."

Her mother's mouth was working, but nothing was coming out. She then noticed her father putting his wand away. Ginny almost laughed at that. That would have been bad, so she was glad she could restrain the urge.

"Mr Potter, will you please help our daughter in the days to come?"

And see her safely back to us at King's Cross?" Arthur Weasley asked formally.

Harry bowed his head. "It would be my honour. I will take care of her as if she was family." He was pleased to note Ginny was happy. Hermione even seemed to be reasonably happy too.

"Thank you," Arthur said graciously. Molly was struggling against her silencing, trying to grab her wand that her husband was holding. "I believe it is time for us to go. Ginny, please write us soon so your mother knows you are still all right."

"Yes, Dad."

"Mr Potter, if you would please return Miss Granger to the hospital wing?" Dumbledore reminded the boy.

"Of course, sir." Harry stood and the two girls stood with him.

"We'll talk about Sheba in a few days."

"Yes, sir." Harry smirked. "Now I know why it's called the Forbidden Forest."

Dumbledore chuckled at Harry and watched the Weasleys leave via his Floo. He did not envy Arthur at this moment.

"Miss Granger? I have to go visit your parents this evening to inform them that you have been revived and are healthy again. Do you have any messages to pass along to them?" McGonagall asked her, although she also glanced at Harry too.

Hermione looked at Harry, who replied. "Professor, please tell them that we'd like to stay here for the rest of the year now that it's safe again, and that we'll owl them a letter tonight or tomorrow morning."

"Very well, Mr Potter," McGonagall acknowledged and the trio quickly left.

"Shall we call it a draw?" Albus offered now that they were alone. "I believe Mr Potter returned between our times."

"It seems only fair," Minerva agreed. "What do you think of Mr Potter's story?"

Albus picked up the old book and showed her the name on it. "I believe he left out a few minor things, but on the whole, I am very relieved that he survived and rescued Miss Weasley. As for Sheba, I shall have to reserve judgment until I meet her."

Minerva pursed her lips. "He seemed oddly protective of the snake at the end."

"I noticed that as well." Albus thought for a moment. "However, I suppose that if an intelligent snake had just saved my life, I might be protective of it as well."

Harry and Ginny had waited quietly in the hospital wing for Hermione. Even though their friend was behind a screen, it sounded like Madam Pomfrey was not pleased that she could find nothing wrong with the girl. Eventually, she gave up and sent Hermione on her way, telling her to get lots of rest. Hermione politely agreed and led the trio out. The nurse had already given Harry and Ginny a check-up and pronounced them fit.

"Get lots of rest," Hermione muttered when they were out in the corridor. "What does she think I was doing for the last three weeks?"

Harry and Ginny grinned at each other. Hermione led them into an unused room and closed the door. They found three chairs and sat,

knees all but touching in the centre. Hermione took charge.

"I think I know the most important parts of the story, but I need to hear the rest before we go to dinner. We can talk about 'us' later tonight." She looked back and forth between the two.

"I guess I should do it," Harry volunteered, when he noticed that Ginny was looking down shyly. He told Hermione everything, spending more time on the first part that she had not heard in the Headmaster's office. They also discussed Malfoy's part a little.

"I say we take it out on Draco, since his father was willing to hurt me," Ginny said a little viciously.

"He would deserve it," Harry agreed.

"But what was done can't be proved," Hermione countered. "No, Draco is a prat on his own, but it's not his fault this happened. The blame goes to the father."

Ginny grinned. "You do know that your sense of fair play can be maddening, right?"

"Perhaps," Hermione allowed with a small smile, "but it does keep us out of trouble."

"But Lucius will not get off scot-free," Harry promised. "I don't know what will be done, but something will be done." Ginny nodded her agreement and the two looked at Hermione.

She thought for a moment and looked at the determination the two of them had. "Since I can't talk you out of it, I'll only say that we need to be very careful."

Harry gave her a quick hug, as did Ginny.

"Let's go eat," Harry told them.

Ginny looked worried.

Hermione reached out and took one of her hands. "Hold your head high, you did nothing wrong."

"But..."

"You were deceived and didn't know what you were doing. And we'll be there with you," Hermione promised.

"Thanks," Ginny shyly said and blushed a little.

They left the room and walked to the Great Hall. Murmurs started up the minute they walked in, and many people were looking at them.

Ginny dropped her head, but Harry whispered, "Remember what Hermione said."

"Thanks," she answered and raised her head back up, trying desperately to maintain a normal look and not show the fear she felt. She knew people could be vicious with rumours.

They had barely seated themselves at the end of the table, one girl on each side of Harry, when the Headmaster walked in. There was a smattering of applause for him while he assumed his normal place.

"Thank you, it's good to be back," Dumbledore greeted everyone at his first public meal since his return. "I am happy to report that our time of trouble has ended. As you may have heard, one of your fellow students was taken hostage against her will. Miss Weasley is not to be blamed for being in the wrong place at the wrong time." Everyone looked at her, causing her to go a little red in the face.

"Fortunately, Mr Ronald Weasley and Mr Harry Potter realized what

was happening and rescued her. Mr Weasley and Mr Potter, please take twenty-five points each for your courage and ability to solve the mystery of the Chamber of Secrets. For making the school safe again, I believe an award for Special Services to the school will be in order." Dumbledore sat down and people started to clap, though the Gryffindor table was the loudest.

Harry blushed and looked down the table to find Ron. He was sitting with their dorm mates and Ron was looking exceedingly happy to be in the spotlight.

"That was nice of the Headmaster," Hermione said softly.

"Yes, it was," Ginny agreed fervently. He must have taken her comment about rumours seriously, and she was very grateful for his help.

They ate in relative silence until the end of the meal. The four brothers of Ginny who were present came over to see them.

"Ginevra, I am happy to see that you are safe," Percy said, taking the lead as the oldest present. "However, it would have been better for you to have been more circumspect of what was happening."

"Percy, what are you saying?," Ron rounded on his older brother, showing again why he was in Gryffindor. "She never had a chance. And where were you all year anyway?" He looked around at the twins too. "Where were all of us? We all ignored her." He looked back at Percy. "So if you plan to blame someone, start with yourself."

Percy looked indignant, but did not say anything before he walked off.

One of the twins stood on one side of Ginny and the other stood on the other side of Harry.

"We're glad to see you're all right, Ginny."

"And thank you, Harry. You're all right in our book."

They did not say it, but the solemnity of the moment and the look on their faces showed them to be sorry for ignoring her this year.

"Thanks, you two," Ginny said with a smile. They both patted her on the shoulder and walked off.

"You're really OK?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Harry helped me to understand a few things, unless you want to talk about feelings?" she asked with an impish smile.

"I think I'll head back," he quickly told her. "You can join us for a game of Exploding Snap, if you want."

"Thanks, Ron, maybe later."

"Err, OK." Ron walked off, looking pretty good for someone who had cracked a bone in his leg the day before.

Hermione leaned forward with an amused smile. "You asked him about feelings on purpose, didn't you?"

"Uh-huh," Ginny answered with her own smile as she finished off her dessert.

"Since we're all done..." Hermione said and stood. The others followed her lead as she left the Hall. They soon found an unused classroom with extra chairs, and sat together at the front, as far away from the door as possible.

Hermione looked very serious. "Why?" she asked Ginny pointedly, eyes narrowed and intense.

"Uh, Hermione? I think I need to explain something first," Harry jumped in. He knew he needed to prevent bad feelings from the start.

"Harry, I need to hear this from Ginny," Hermione said firmly with a touch of anger.

"Fine, I'll shut up, but only after I tell you something first." He was not going to let assumptions make things any more strained than they already were.

Hermione turned her glare to him. "What?" she asked curtly.

"Now that this has happened to Ginny," Harry glared at Hermione when she looked like she was going to interrupt him. "Yes -- to Ginny -- because I've figured more of this bond thing out. We didn't know why it happened between you and me, but I do now."

Hermione pulled back and sat up a little straighter, her curiosity peaked. "You do?"

"I think so. You were having your life threatened by a troll. After I saved you, what was the first thing you said to me?" he asked.

The brunette thought about that for a few seconds. "Erm...'You saved my life', if I remember correctly."

"Exactly. Ginny was threatened by a magical artefact and a Basilisk, and I saved her from those. When she woke, the first person she saw was me and the first thing she said was ..." Harry turned and looked at the little redhead.

"'You saved my life'," she whispered, understanding what Harry was getting at.

Hermione looked carefully at him, starting to say something several

times, but stopping before she did. Eventually, she said, "That doesn't make sense. People save other's lives all the time. If that was all there was, then this would be commonly known because every male Auror would have multiple women bonded to them. And yet, we've never heard of this before and I can't find a reference to it in the library." She looked at Ginny. "Or have you heard of something like this before?"

"No," Ginny admitted. "This is more like something out of a fairy tale. I mean, a lot of fairy tales have a root in a real story that happened in the Wizarding World in the past, but this goes even beyond those stories."

"But..." Hermione tailed off. After a moment, she took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "Ginny, I'm sorry. I was getting all angry at you and it sounds like it wasn't your fault."

Ginny shook her head. "No, I didn't know this was possible, or about you and Harry already being together. And I wasn't trying to do this."

"What were you trying to do?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

Ginny hesitantly looked up at Harry.

"Tell her," Harry encouraged her. "We can't have secrets or it will tear us apart. Even I can figure that out."

"OK," Ginny said quietly. Then she launched into the description of her family, like she had told Harry. She also explained her plan to try to become Harry's girlfriend to help in the escape from her family. She only left out the part about being willing to do almost anything to bolster Harry's desire and happiness for keeping her. Harry graciously did not mention that part either. She was still ashamed of herself for that.

When Ginny finished talking, Hermione looked at the girl, head

bowed and looking like the eleven year-old girl she was. Hermione also looked over to Harry. Of the three, it seemed that she was the only one who had a good family growing up. With no more thought, she stood and opened her arms. Ginny rushed over, folding herself into Hermione's embrace, and started to cry quietly, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do this," over and over. Hermione held her, telling her gently, "It's all right. It wasn't your fault, it was magic. We'll find a way to deal with this."

Harry rose and stepped over, letting Hermione put her left arm around his shoulders while he put his arms around the girls' waists. They held each other for a few minutes.

"What are we going to do with ourselves?" Hermione rhetorically asked.

"Live together," Harry answered, not sure what else to say.

Hermione looked at him quizzically. "What do you mean?"

"Ginny told me that bonds like this are for life. The bond is probably why we trust each other so much. I mean, I'd never have told either of you about my childhood until we had known each other for years," Harry explained. "Ginny thinks it's actually a form of marriage and makes us adults, at least magically."

Hermione groaned before sarcastically saying, "Great, just what we need." She looked at the other girl. "Really, Ginny?" The girl sniffled and nodded, her tears no longer flowing. "I can see that I didn't research this enough." Hermione looked to Harry. "Sit down, will you please?" Harry sat and Hermione pushed Ginny onto his lap. "Hold her for a bit, Harry. I think she needs you more right now." As she looked at the two, she said, "I wonder if the magic of bond is why we're so accepting of this arrangement?" Neither of the other two had an answer.

While Harry held Ginny, who snuggled into him, Hermione reached into her robes and pulled out a Muggle pen and a small notebook. "Sometimes, I don't know why everyone here insists on using quills," she said sarcastically as she started to write.

"What is this list for?" Harry asked, used to this habit of hers.

"Things we need to research," Hermione absently answered as she continued to write. "Ginny, I know that hundreds of years ago, multiple wives were allowed. Is that still true?"

"No," she said quietly, enjoying being on Harry's lap and being held by him. "I remember in one of Mum's books it said they're not allowed -- not since the early seventeen hundreds. The closest thing we have now are mistresses. I think there is another term that's used in laws if they are official, but most Pureblood men don't register them."

Hermione snorted. "Sure, they wouldn't want to advertise their indiscretions. But you think there is a legal way to do this?" She saw Ginny nod and thought about it. "Concubines maybe?"

Ginny brightened, "Yes, that's the word. It allows the woman to inherit and any children can take the man's name, but she can't be called a wife. I, uh, I guess I'd be the concubine." Ginny looked pained. "You were here first."

"Maybe," Hermione said compassionately and reached out to grip the other girl's hand. "But maybe there are other ways, too. That's what research is for."

Ginny nodded meekly, but did not look particularly hopeful.

"Uh, that's only if we stay here, right?" Harry asked. "I mean, what if we lived somewhere else after we finish school?"

Hermione looked at him appreciatively. "Good point. Some cultures

do allow for multiple wives. We'll want to research that angle, too. I don't want to make it too hard on Ginny."

"Thanks," Ginny said weakly but with a big smile, appreciating the olive branch the older girl was offering. "You might want to research Egypt. My brother Bill has mentioned that their culture follows a lot of the older traditions, like from a thousand years ago. It must not be too bad since he lives there."

Hermione scribbled that down. "That's long term and we can figure that out later. What about now?" They both looked at her. "You know, how are we going to act and deal with this? For one, I don't think I want to tell my parents yet. I think they would freak as they wonder what else the magical world could do to me beyond me basically forcing me to be married at thirteen ... even thirteen and a half!"

Ginny giggled faintly. "Yeah, telling my parents will be bad too, although I think I'll need to tell them sooner than you will." She looked sad. "Hopefully this summer won't be too bad."

"Why would the summer be bad?" Harry asked.

"What would your uncle have done if you did something he told you never to do?" Ginny asked disconsolately. At Harry's look of sudden understanding, she nodded. "Yeah, I'm going to be in so much trouble for standing up to my mother, let alone writing in the diary. Dad will help a little, but he's at work most of the time. I'll probably be doing chores from sun up to sun down all summer long."

"Maybe I can invite you over to spend a week or two with me?" Hermione suggested.

"That would be nice, but I doubt it would work. You could try for the end of the summer; she might loosen up by then," Ginny speculated.

"We have a bigger problem at the moment," Harry told them. "Mum

and Dad want to remove us from Hogwarts."

"Is that why you said we wanted to stay until the end of the year?" Hermione asked, not quite believing the situation they were in.

"Yes. I can show you their letter after you were petrified. They were really upset."

"But ... what about me? I'd be left alone here," Ginny said, sounding a little scared and lonely.

"That's something else for us to research," Hermione answered, as if the answer was waiting for them.

Ginny nodded and hoped it did turn out all right. She stood up, causing the other two to look at her questioningly. Ginny grabbed Hermione's shoulders and lifted a little. Hermione got the message and stood too. Ginny then guided her to Harry's lap and pushed her down before taking her own seat back. "We're going to have to learn to share," Ginny told Hermione. "And we're going to have to learn to act like normal girls. We can only look like friends with him, not girlfriends, at least not for a few years. Maybe he can date one of us for a while, then pretend to break up and go with the other, like he can't make up his mind. No," she suddenly contradicted herself, "I'm not thinking clearly right now; that could look bad for us."

Hermione blushed. "Right, well we can talk about those things later. I'm not sure they even matter right now." To try to not make it more embarrassing, she added, "In the meantime, we can study with each other in order to spend more time together. We can help you, Ginny."

"Thanks, that would be, uh, helpful," she agreed with a smile at the redundancy. "I didn't do badly this year, but I could have done better if I hadn't had to deal with the diary," Ginny said guiltily and looking down to hide her face. "I didn't always get a lot of sleep."

Harry reached out to hold her hand. "You'll start to feel better now, and we'll help you get caught up, too."

Ginny nodded and gave him a shy smile of thanks.

Hermione checked the time. "Let's go to the library. We have enough time to find a book or two and check them out."

Ginny pulled the older girl into a hug. "Thank you, Hermione. You really are a friend. You would have every right to treat me horribly, but you haven't." She hugged the girl tightly again.

Hermione returned the hug and let go. "We have to get along, Ginny. If we didn't, life would be miserable for all of us. We're all in this together, and none of us planned what's happened. Besides, I don't think I could treat someone badly."

"Except for Malfoy?" Harry asked mischievously.

Ginny giggled as Hermione gave him a look of long suffering, until she broke down a few seconds later and chuckled. "I might make an exception for him. Speaking of which, we will have to be on our guard not to let his meaningless insults get to us."

"I'll try, Hermione, really I will. But if he goes too far, I will respond," Harry promised her.

"Too right," Ginny agreed.

Hermione sighed. "You two are going to test me, I can tell." She heard laughter from the other two as they followed her out of the room they had been using.

Half an hour later, they had three books and were hurrying back to Gryffindor Tower before curfew for the first and second years.

"I'm really looking forward to next year when our curfew is an hour later," Hermione said as they walked quickly back.

"No fair," grumped Ginny.

"I'm sorry, Ginny, but you'll always be a year behind," Hermione logically pointed out.

"I know, but that doesn't mean I have to like it."

Harry decided this was one of those times to stay quiet and did so, following the girls through the portrait hole.

They found an unoccupied table and took it over, each taking a book and looking for helpful information. Ginny took the book on Wizarding society in England, Harry the book on Wizarding cultures around the world, and Hermione took the book on law in Magical England.

Two hours later, the common room was mostly empty, since classes started again in the morning.

"Ginny? Find anything?" Hermione asked quietly as she closed her book.

"This book mentions concubines and talks about them being secondary wives," Ginny answered just as quietly. "I didn't find much else that was helpful, other than their main purpose is supposed to be for carrying on the family line if the first wife was barren. The other use was in case the man somehow had multiple family lines. For that, he could use the children of the concubine to carry on the other family line so the name didn't die out. But all the children from the wife come first in inheritance, even children born after older children from the concubine."

"That's interesting, and it confirms some of what you told us," Hermione lightly said. "I was able to verify that there is only one wife

allowed, and most of the other things Ginny suspected were true. One thing that is new is that we can't register our bond until Harry is thirteen. I don't know why they picked that age, but that's the way the law reads."

"So not until late this summer at the earliest?" Harry asked.

"Correct. At that time, we could register all of us, Ginny age's notwithstanding. It's only your age that counts, Harry," Hermione explained. "That would exempt us from the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery. Once we're registered, we could separately register for each of the other privileges adults have, like Apparation, buying and selling of magical creatures, and so forth. As useful as not having to worry about underage magic would be, we actually already have it for the most part, or at least Harry and I do because of the wards around our house."

"Uh, if I'm really careful, it's not a problem for me most of the time either," Ginny hesitantly said.

"Oh?" Hermione asked with surprise, trying to keep her voice down.

"Well, I know that Fred and George have done magic around the house and never received a warning from the Ministry. Mum punishes them when she catches them since it's..." Ginny did air quotes as she intoned, "not right."

Hermione stared at the other girl her eyes slowly going wider. "Really?" Ginny nodded. "That's not fair," Hermione huffed. "That means that Muggle-born students are being treated unfairly because they can't get away with the same thing."

"It's not totally fair, and yet it is," Harry said, receiving a baleful glare from Hermione. "Really, take me for example. Sure, my relatives knew about magic, so that would argue I should be able to use it. But what if I was using magic and Dudley's friends walked in and saw

me? That would let the secret of magic out and I wouldn't have had any adult witches or wizards to cover it up, or to get help in covering it up. It's not fair, but they do have a reason."

Hermione deflated and relented. "All right, you have a point and I should have thought of that."

Ginny grinned. "What? Hermione didn't think of something?" she giggled

"No, I'm not perfect," Hermione said sheepishly.

"So," Harry spoke up, trying to get them back on track. "It looks like that if Hermione and I are forced to change schools, that we could register our bond and that would help keep us together because we'd all legally be adults and you could come with us Ginny." He looked at the other two for confirmation.

"Yes, other than my mother would probably go on a hexing rampage," Ginny replied.

"That sounds good to me as well," Hermione agreed, "although I hope we can convince our parents to not withdraw us from Hogwarts. I'd like to avoid telling them about the bond for as long as possible, or until we can completely explain it, as I can't predict completely what they would do with what little information we know now."

"Then we have the beginnings of a plan," Harry said with a smile.

"It's time to go to bed," Hermione announced. "Give me the books and I'll return them tomorrow. Harry, I'll write the letter to our parents upstairs and let you look at it tomorrow morning before I send it." Harry agreed.

They all gave each other a good night hug and went to their dorm rooms for the evening.

Harry and the girls, along with Ron and Neville started to board a carriage so they could ride to Hogsmeade to go home for the summer. They looked at each other as they all realized that a carriage only held four people and there were five of them. When an empty carriage pulled up, they were all still wondering who was going to have to ride with someone else.

Hermione took charge. "Honestly, it's not that hard. Harry, get in first. Ginny, you're next as you're the smallest." Those two climbed in and Hermione scrambled in after them. Before Ginny could sit on the bench, Hermione gently grabbed her shoulders and steered her to Harry and sat her on his lap. Hermione took the seat beside them. Ron and Neville climbed in and took the other bench.

As the carriage started rolling, Ron looked at his sister and his friend, who had his hands on Ginny's waist to keep her from falling off his lap. "Ginny, why are you on his lap?"

Ginny smirked at him. "Because Hermione put me here."

Ron did not let up. "Harry, why are you holding her there?"

"So she won't fall off. Or would you rather I let go and let her bounce out the back?" Harry asked dryly and Neville chuckled. "I suppose we could have let you catch the next carriage, Ron, but that didn't seem right either."

Ron sat there and thought about it and then nodded, finally willing to let it go, although he also kept a close watch on the two.

Harry looked to his left at Hermione, who proudly smiled at him.

The five of them shared a train compartment, too. After they got comfortable, Ron asked, "Did you really go back down into the Chamber of Secrets, Harry?"

Harry was sitting between Hermione and Ginny. He looked to his right at Ginny and saw her cringe slightly, leaning slightly towards him. He reached down and grabbed her hand and squeezed it for a few seconds. She looked at him gratefully for the support. Ginny had mentioned she was having a few nightmares about the whole thing, but said they were not too bad. Talking to Harry and Hermione had helped her.

"Yes. Dumbledore and I went back down yesterday." Harry noticed that Neville was very interested. He had told Neville a little about their adventure, but not all of the details. "Dumbledore was pretty amazing. He made all the rocks go back up into the crack in the ceiling and put a stone arch underneath to help hold them up. Once he did that, it was easy to walk back to the main chamber, though Dumbledore kept adding arches every so often. He said he was making sure there wouldn't be problems later. Sheba was there and we had a conversation with her, or at least I did, translating for the Headmaster."

"So the Basilisk is still down there?" Neville looked as scared as he sounded.

"Yeah, but don't worry. She's really there to protect the school, and she promised the Headmaster to do that. She only petrified people because Voldemort bound her to his will and controlled her, forcing her to do his bidding. I broke the control, so now she's back to normal," Harry explained. He grinned at his friend. "And she's also reducing the number of Acromantula in the forest."

"Sounds good to me," Ron said very fervently; his fear of spiders was well known among the small group.

"What are you going to do this summer, Neville?" Hermione asked, changing the topic so Ginny would be spared hearing about the Chamber anymore.

"Gran said she has a few lessons planned for me," he said a bit despondently before he perked up a little. "Most of the time, I'll probably spend in the family greenhouse. Professor Sprout gave me a few cuttings from some of the tamer plants."

"Neville," Ron sounded disappointed. "It's summer, you can let it all go."

"Some of us like to learn, Ron," Hermione pointed out, a little firmer than she probably needed to.

"Some of us like to have summers off and want to fly as much as possible to relax," Ron retorted.

Harry put his hand on Hermione's arm and Neville jumped into the conversation, not wanting to sit through more of their bickering than required.

"What are you doing this summer, Hermione?" Neville asked.

"Oh, we're going to France for a few weeks. Besides touring, we're also going to visit a magical school there called Beauxbatons."

"Why?" Neville asked and Ron looked very curious too. Ginny looked out the window, suddenly becoming very interested in the countryside.

Hermione sighed. "I don't think my parents are very happy with Hogwarts, and they want to look at other options."

Harry snorted. "Don't think? I thought their letters were pretty clear, especially the one I got after you were petrified and the one we both received after you were cured. I can imagine the conversation they had when McGonagall went to tell them what had happened to you, and I'll bet it wasn't pretty."

Hermione nodded slowly and with resignation. "You're right. I'm just hoping we can talk them out of moving us. Despite the problem this year, I've like it here the best of all the schools I've attended."

"We'll find a way," Harry assured her before he looked over at Ginny. The little redhead gave him a weak smile and then resumed looking out the window.

The rest of the trip was spent talking about their possible electives next year and what it would be like to go to Hogsmeade on the weekends.

Just before they reached the train station, Harry saw Malfoy walk by. Fortunately, he did not stop to harass them. Harry also saw this as an opportunity to help with one of his summer projects.

"Gotta go to the loo. I'll be back in a minute." He hurried out before anyone could stop him.

Harry had spent a few hours in the library this last week putting the research skills Hermione had taught him to good use. He had a vague outline of an idea and had needed to find three new spells to be able to make it work.

He walked quickly after Malfoy and almost caught up to him as Malfoy was about to leave the car for the next one. Pulling his wand, he cast one of the spells he had looked up in the library a few days ago. It hit Malfoy's shoe. The prat walked on, unaware of what had happened.

With a smile, Harry put his wand away and visited the loo, just so he could honestly say he went. A few minutes later, he returned to the compartment he and his friends shared and no one asked any questions about his little trip.

At King's Cross, they each got off the train and found their trunks. They all told Neville good-bye when he walked off to meet his Gran. Hermione and Harry joined Ginny and Ron moving toward the Weasleys. Mrs Weasley still did not look happy.

Ginny turned to her two bond-mates and gave a long hug to Hermione. "Hopefully we'll see each other before the end of the summer."

"I'll invite you over when we get back."

Ginny nodded and then went to Harry, who had just finished saying good-bye to Ron. She gave him a long hug too. "Thanks for everything, Harry. I'll try to get Ron to invite you and Hermione over. I know it won't do any good if I ask."

"Try asking your father," he suggested before he let her go.

Ginny nodded and then turned to face her parents. She was not looking forward to this summer.

Harry and Hermione said good-bye to Ginny's parents and left to find their own parents. They were easy to find in the normal part of the station, waiting right outside the portal to the magical train platform. Emma gave Hermione a hug as if she never wanted to let go. Dan was more restrained, but the look of joy on his face was unmistakable when he gave his daughter a hug. Harry fully understood and did not feel uncomfortable at all, especially as his own hugs were only a little less dramatic.

As was becoming usual, once they were loaded up and driving down the road, Emma turned in her seat. "So, are you two glad to be back?"

"Mostly, but we'll really miss our friends," Harry offered first.

"We're always glad to see you, Mum and Dad," Hermione hurriedly added, "but we are used to having our friends around now. In fact, I was wondering if we could invite someone over for a while after our holiday in France."

Emma smiled at the two, both pleased and torn. She was pleased that they were making other friends, but also knew that having friends would make leaving Hogwarts much harder. Emma was not happy with Hogwarts at the moment, not at all. "It's possible. Why don't we wait and see how things are after our trip? Oh, is Professor Snape still behaving himself?"

"Mostly," Harry answered. At Emma's inquiring look, he explained. "He gives me strange looks and mutters to himself when he sees me in the corridors, but he leaves us alone."

Emma did not answer for a brief moment. "If that's acceptable to you, but please let me know what he does in the future. I'm still talking to Professor McGonagall about him."

The conversation continued on, discussing little things and their upcoming trip. Each student could see the concern and worry slowly melting from Emma as they talked and knew she was happy they were safe with her. The summer for Harry and Hermione was off to a nice start, despite the fact that they knew a very important conversation was coming this summer.

((A/N: I must credit "noylj" for indirectly giving me the idea of a dysfunctional Weasley family with Molly making her boys run away, prompting Ginny to try to get away like her brothers. He gave me the idea in a review on another story.

Also, my beta "moshpit" thought it would be amusing if Harry's power could bond non-humans females, like the Basilisk he "saved". As amusing as the thought is, the power will only bond "witches" to him.

Year 3 officially starts next chapter and will be 6 chapters long, as things start to get more complicated.))

Chapter 8 (Year 3) -- Protecting Family

Three days after they had come home from finishing their second year at Hogwarts, Harry and Hermione were cleaning up the remains of breakfast once their parents had left for work. Hedwig flew in the window with a letter, causing Harry to stop putting away the extra food while Hermione continued to load the dishwasher.

"Hi, Hedwig. How's my favourite girl?" Harry gently rubbed the owl's head, ignoring the quiet snort from Hermione's direction, and received a soft bark in reply. It was obvious that she was happy. Harry reached up into a cabinet and found an owl treat for her. The owl treat supply at the Granger's was used for both his owl and their own owl, Archimedes. Harry gave Hedwig the treat and pulled the letter from her leg. "Looks like Ginny's writing," he announced.

"Read it out loud," Hermione asked as she continued working.

Harry leaned against the counter and opened the letter. He held it with one hand and used the other to pet Hedwig.

Dear Harry and Hermione,

I hope your summer is going better than mine. No real surprises here, I suppose. Except for glances from my Mum, everything appeared normal for the first day. However, when Dad went to work the next day, I received the lecture of a lifetime. I did my best to say nothing, but I've told you a little about the Weasley temper. Eventually, I couldn't take it anymore and reacted. Obviously, that made things worse. I'm basically grounded for the rest of the summer, or perhaps my life, and my brothers will have the easiest summer of their lives while I do almost all the chores here. I'm not even supposed to use the family owl, so thanks for sending Hedwig! I got a scathing look when she came with a letter, so please try to send her to my room next time.

Don't worry, Harry, I know that I may think of this as rough, but it's nowhere near as bad as what you told me your childhood was like. I have all the food I want and she never hits me. She just screams at me from time to time and gives me a lot of chores to do.

Mum doesn't realize it, but she is making me want to leave more and more. I'm going to talk to Dad tonight. I'm sure I can get him to talk to her and stop the useless lectures, or at least I hope so.

There's not much else to write about, other than I miss you both terribly and can hardly wait until September.

Love Ginny

He slammed his hand and the letter down on the counter, causing Hedwig spread her wings briefly in surprise.

"Harry," Hermione said softly as she came over to him and put her hand on his arm to try to calm him down. "It's their family. You can't go charging in to save her from this. She said it's not that bad, and you have to trust her."

"But she's my family now, our family, too," he said angrily.

Hermione pulled him into a hug, rubbing his back softly to calm him. "Yes, she is, but we've decided not to say anything for now. Despite the trouble we're going through trying to hide the bond and the trouble she's having there, I think we're still doing the right thing as I don't know what our parents would say. She also said she's going to talk to her dad, and presumably did so last night. Let's wait and see what happens."

Harry lightly squeezed her arm back and let go. "You're right, we need to wait and see. But I also want to look up a few things to see if there's something I can do to help her anyway."

"What? You do research?" she asked with an easy grin.

Harry blew a raspberry. "It's your fault, you know," he told her, matching her grin. "Let's finish up here and then I want to look at that book on Wizarding customs and traditions again."

"All right," Hermione said happily, before she got a more concerned look. "Harry, can you feel Ginny from here?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Is Ginny all right? You know, she's not injured or anything, is she?"

"No. She's not injured. I can't tell anything beyond that, other than her location is at The Burrow." He looked at her with a puzzled expression for a moment. "Can't you tell where she is or how she's doing?"

"No," she told him. "I can only detect you. I guess the bond and the magic for the bond comes from you, so you're the only one who can feel all of us. We can only feel you, since we're only bonded to you. Or at least that's my guess based on what we know."

He nodded. "That makes sense. Well, let's go read about traditions so I can find a way to help Ginny."

They spent the rest of the morning looking through a few books and writing down ideas. By the time they were ready for lunch, Harry was pretty happy.

Harry looked at his bond-mate as he tapped the paper in front of him. "I think this is a decent compromise, don't you?"

Hermione sighed. "I don't want to do it, but we may have to. What will the Weasleys think of us?"

"I think Mr Weasley will understand and he's the one I care about. Mrs Weasley can think whatever she wants." He watched her think about that.

"I suppose, but if you do, at least wait until after we get back from our holiday trip. That may make Mrs Weasley never want to talk to us again."

Harry considered her request. "All right, I suppose it makes sense to give them time to work it out on their own."

Hermione looked relieved. "What about her brothers?"

"I think they'll support her, except maybe Ron." Harry ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know what Ron will think or do."

"Me neither."

"Do you or our parents have a compass?"

"For what?" Hermione asked, confused at the non sequitur.

"Remember? We talked about repaying Lucius Malfoy for what he did to Ginny, me, and to you."

"It sounds like you have a plan. What did you want to do?" she asked hesitantly.

"On the train, I put a tracking charm on Draco. Tonight, I want to fly to where it points to see where they live, as well as see how long it takes for me to get there. We also need to time how long it takes for Hedwig to fly to London."

Hermione was already looking worried. She was a little afraid of what Harry might try to do.

"Then in a few nights, I'll fly back and do something to their house and you'll send a disguised Hedwig to the Ministry with a note as if from the Malfoys asking for help. The Aurors will arrive, and in trying to help the Malfoys, I'm hoping they'll find something bad hidden there."

"Because if he had one bad item like the diary, he'll probably have more?" she theorized.

"Exactly."

"And what do you plan to do, Harry?"

"Absolutely nothing." At her glare, he added, "I think it's best if we leave it at that, because then you can honestly say you don't know anything about anything that may happen."

Hermione continued to glare at him, but Harry did not give in. She eventually huffed, exasperated. "Fine, I don't know if this is the wisest course of action, but I do agree something needs to be done. From what was said before we came home, and the lack of anything in the Daily Prophet, it's obvious that no one else is going to do anything."

Harry grinned. "Thanks! Let's have lunch and then we can send Hedwig to Diagon Alley. After we do that, we can catch the Knight Bus and then wait for her and time it."

"It won't be the same, but it should be close enough for us," Hermione agreed before she started to look doubtful. "I'm not sure we should go, but Mum and Dad didn't say we couldn't..."

"That's the spirit," Harry encouraged her with a hearty smile.

"I swear, you're going to get me into so much trouble, Harry."

He just grinned at her, before leading her back to the kitchen.

They had a quick lunch and then put Harry's plan into action. Carefully noting the time, Harry told Hedwig to fly to Diagon Alley and to find him there. They went to the end of their street and caught the Knight Bus. Ten minutes later, they were sitting down for some ice cream outside and waiting for Hedwig. The owner of the ice cream shop had told them the Ministry was about a mile from the shopping district.

Hermione finished her ice cream and went to the book shop while Harry continued to wait. Half an hour later, she came back with a few books and a compass that was made to be mounted on a broom.

"That's great," Harry told her as he looked it over.

"It cost a little more, but I thought you'd like that model," she told him with a smug look.

"Why?"

She grabbed one of the books, a very slim volume indeed by her standards, and flipped it open to reveal pages covered with maps. She turned to a page showing the southern half of England. There was a red dot on the page. Looking closer, Harry could see that it marked somewhere in central London. Her smug look turned to a smirk. "Because that compass is bound to this book, and you can know where you end up between the two of them."

"That's brilliant!" he whispered very excitedly as he looked at the two parts intently.

Hermione preened at the praise.

As discretely as possible, Harry did the spell to point to the tracking charm. After they aligned the map and compass, they saw that Malfoy -- or at least his shoe -- was currently somewhere off to the

west. Hermione pulled out a pencil and lightly drew a line on the map.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"It should give you a good idea as to where you're going. We'll do this again at home and the second line will show you the area. It's call triangulation." She sighed. "We don't have the right tools to have the precision needed to know exactly where he is."

"Still, I can see how it would give us the right area to..." Harry stopped as the sound of flapping wings caught his attention. He looked up and raised his arm just in time for Hedwig to land on it. "Good girl," he cooed at her. "Time?"

"Fifty-six minutes," Hermione said as she looked at her watch.

Harry set his owl on the edge of the table and pulled a small cup of water over. Hedwig drank deeply out of it and Harry lightly petted her back.

When she finished drinking, Harry pulled out an owl treat and gave it to her. As she ate it, Harry told her, "That was very helpful, Hedwig. When you're done, you can fly back home, but take your time. You don't need to tire yourself out." The owl gave a small hooting bark and took off.

"Let's go, Harry." Hermione led them back toward the street where they could catch the Knight Bus. Hedwig arrived home just over an hour later.

Harry cast the pointing charm for Malfoy again, and the second pencil line intersected the first in Wiltshire, somewhere in the middle of Salisbury Plain.

Hermione looked at him. "Harry, I don't know if your plan is practical.

It looks like you'll have to fly nearly a hundred miles each way. What about using the Knight Bus, even if it's only for part of the way, say to Salisbury?"

He considered that. "It's tempting to use the Knight Bus, but we can't have anyone knowing we had any part in this. Besides, my Nimbus will go nearly one hundred miles an hour if I can fly straight, or so the company advertised. So that's only about a one hour flight each way. There and back will be two hours and a little more time for scouting to find it." He looked at her seriously, "I can easily do that in a single night."

"Do your..." he stopped with a smile, "do our parents have the same schedule tomorrow?" He was still getting used to thinking of Dan and Emma as his parents, and sometimes he slipped.

Hermione smiled at his correction. "Yes. That would give you time to take a nap."

"A Pepperup potion tonight to make sure I don't fall off of my broom might be a good idea, too," he suggested while thinking aloud.

"Right, and I can watch the map to see where you end up and mark it; then you could use the map on your second trip to be more certain." She stopped and looked at him for a moment, her eyes narrowed, her lips pressed together, then sighed. "I can't believe you're talking me into this."

Harry grinned at her. "You know it's for a good cause."

Hermione shook her head in chagrin, but she did not correct him.

Hermione brewed a double batch of Pepperup potion that afternoon -- one for each evening.

As dinner ended that evening, Dan said, "Hermione, Harry, we'd like to talk to you about school."

The two students looked at each other and felt a little fear. This was the conversation they had been expecting their parents to have with them and they were not looking forward to it.

"Please don't get upset," Emma quickly told them. "We want to discuss what's been happening to you and what we should do about it."

Looking across the table, Hermione realized she must be wearing the same slightly-panicked expression Harry was right now. She took a deep breath. "Mum, we know this year did not go as well as we all would have liked, but it was not that bad."

"Hermione, please don't purposefully ignore the facts, it's unbecoming of you," her father told her flatly. "You were Petrified and Professor McGonagall said it was luck that that you weren't killed, and then Harry was almost killed by having to fight some monster snake. Those are not the sort of things we envisioned when we allowed you to attend Hogwarts."

"Honey," her mother said, "we love you both and we want you to be happy in the magical school you go to; but we feel it's more important for you to be able to enjoy many more years of life. Despite what we were originally told, Hogwarts is not safe."

"But we've actually made friends at school for the first time..."

"That includes me too," Harry quickly added. "I never had friends at school before Hogwarts."

Dan looked uncomfortable, as he knew that was true for both of them. "And you don't think you can make friends at another magical

school?"

"We obviously can't answer that now, but why give up what we have?" Hermione argued. "Also, my being Petrified rather than killed was not luck. I knew what kind of monster we were facing and I took proper precautions just in case it found us, knowing that Petrifaction could be cured. I was trying to find Professor McGonagall to tell her I knew what the monster was when I ran into it."

"And I knew what kind of monster it was when I went to rescue Ginny, because of Hermione," Harry told them. "I'll admit that I was surprised when Professor Lockhart brought the ceiling down almost upon Ron and me, but I knew that I could talk to snakes so I didn't think it would be that hard to get it to leave me alone so I could help Ginny. I came out of the Chamber of Secrets without a scratch on me, so it wasn't that bad from my point of view." He purposefully left out the terrifying moments when he was battling Riddle, as it would not have helped his story.

Hermione saw her mother give her father a look of frustration.

"We would very much like both of you to change schools," Dan said firmly. "While you may feel more comfortable there, please stop to consider how we feel about it. Every time Professor McGonagall comes to us, we have to wonder what she's going to tell us and which one of you is injured ... or worse. That is very taxing on your mother and I'm dealing with it only slightly better. Please consider how you would feel when you have children one day and they are in danger of being killed."

Hermione saw Harry hang his head and she felt guilty as well. It had not occurred to her to think about how her parents felt about all of this. If she had children, she would want them kept safe. Sighing as she lost most of her resistance, she wearily said, "I see your point. Hypothetically, what would you prefer us to do?"

"Realistically..."

Hermione looked up to see her mother give her and Harry a very caring look.

"We'd like to look at Beauxbatons in France during our trip this summer and see about transferring both of you there. We won't ask you to give up your magic or that lifestyle as we know how much that means to you; we only ask that you be safe."

"It did look like the next best school," Dan added. "There's also a Durmstrang in Germany, but the two books I looked at didn't make it sound like a place you'd want to attend. They made it sound more like a military school."

Hermione looked at Harry, who was thinking about it all very carefully. It was not hard to guess what he was thinking, since they had already talked about this "discussion" in anticipation of it. In some ways, both of them did not care if they went to Hogwarts or not, at least far as the school itself was concerned. The major sticking point was Ginny. Harry would be thirteen this summer so they could register their bond. He could also call in the Life Debt and "force" Ginny to join them so they could all continue to go to school together. Of course, the "forcing" really applied to Ginny's parents, not Ginny, who wanted to be with them as badly as they wanted her with them. The problem was, that would essentially force the three of them to declare their bond in order to answer all the questions about why Harry was calling in the Life Debt now.

"I can see your point too," Harry said into the silence, "but it's hard to leave the first school I was ever accepted at, and my first friends other than Hermione." He looked at his parents. "Can we wait to decide until after we've visited the school?"

A gasp escaped Hermione.

"What?" her mother asked.

"What if we can't get in? I mean, it's in France and they speak French there. We don't know French," she pointed out.

Emma's mouth dropped open slightly before it closed with a tiny click. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Me neither," Dan said before he started to chuckle. "Thwarted by a small but very significant fact." He looked at his daughter. "Would there be a spell to help you learn or use another language? Magic seems to be able to do everything else."

A frustrated look came over Hermione. "I don't know." She hated to admit that, as she disliked the teasing face Harry was making at her. "But I can owl Professor Flitwick and ask him. I would expect him to know if it existed."

"That sounds like a good idea," Emma said.

"And if Beauxbatons requires French and there is no spell, then we'll stay at Hogwarts?" Harry asked.

Dan looked hesitant and Emma more so, but he finally nodded. "I guess so. Would you be willing to start learning French? We could try to find you a tutor, so that perhaps you could transfer after one more year."

"We could use a tutor during the summer holidays, but not at school. We'd have to learn on our own -- assuming there is no spell to help," Hermione pointed out.

"Very well, Hermione, please write to your Professor and ask him about a language spell. After we get his answer, we'll decide what to do about learning French. A tour of the school and the information they give us will be the determining factor. How does that sound?"

Emma asked.

"I suppose," Hermione reluctantly said as she looked at her bond-mate across from her.

Harry nodded and with resignation said, "I guess we have a letter to write."

Dan and Emma hugged both of them and sent them off to write the letter. Soon, the Grangers' owl was winging his way to Hogwarts.

Harry and Hermione sat down and put a movie in to watch for the rest of the evening. As the first song started, it was with amusement that Hermione realized she had randomly selected "Beauty and the Beast", which took place in France.

Dan and Emma went to bed at a little after ten, allowing Hermione to creep into Harry's room at half eleven when it was good and dark. Harry got up out of bed fully dressed except for his shoes. He put them on while Hermione made sure the compass on the broom was working.

"Fly west-southwest once you pass Heathrow Airport, and be careful not to fly too close! Hitting an aeroplane would probably get you killed," she whispered. She handed him the Pepperup potion and he downed it quickly.

Harry donned his Invisibility Cloak. "At least it's not raining." He opened the window. "I'll time it both ways, but the trip back will probably be more accurate as I'll know where I'm going."

"Once you leave the wards here, wait at least five minutes before you do any magic, so it can't be traced back to this house," she reminded him. "Good luck, I'll be watching the map." Hermione gave him a hug

and then a kiss on the cheek before she crept back to her bed, more worried than she wanted him to know.

Harry stood there for a moment and thought about her. He admitted that he still did not have any romantic feelings for her yet. He was only about to turn thirteen. But the hug was nice and the kiss had been unexpectedly pleasant. He wondered how he would feel about her next summer.

With a smile, Harry noticed it was twenty-five minutes before midnight as he crawled out the window. Taking a deep breath, he took off, carefully going around the trees in the back garden.

Flying mostly straight up until he was about fifty feet in the air and still within their protected ward area, Harry got his bearings, fixing the site in his mind so he knew where to come back to. He also used his wand for some light to check the compass for the direction he needed to go. With the needed landmarks, he aimed directly west to avoid Heathrow Airport, knowing he was going to have to go around the north side of it before heading to his real destination. He leaned forward and started to fly as fast as he could.

About six minutes later, he reckoned he was far enough past the airport to make his turn. Slowing, he took a fix on Malfoy and found he was still west-southwest. Pointing his broom that way, he accelerated to top speed.

About an hour later, he knew he was getting close, as he did not have to move much for his wand to point a different direction. He really hoped that his target was Malfoy's house, and wondered if there was a way to double-check it, but could not think of a safe way to do that without drawing unwanted attention. He also decided it was time to use another spell he had learned just for this project.

Harry cast a Magic Sight charm and almost blinded himself as he looked at his broom. Putting a hand up under his eyes so he could

not look straight down at his broom, he looked out. There were several domes of magic visible, but one was very near him. He flew in that direction. He wondered who the other magical area belonged to, and supposed that Crabbe and Goyle were the most obvious guesses from what he knew of their families.

The dome of magic went up about two hundred feet in the air and was about four hundred feet in diameter, or so he guessed. Harry flew at least a hundred feet above the dome to make sure he would not run into it. He cancelled his Magic Sight and was surprised by how much better his eyes suddenly felt. He had not realized how much strain that spell put on him; it had been like looking at a bright light in a dark room.

He did the Pointing spell again and flew around. His wand visibly moved to stay firmly pointing at the house in front of him. Harry smiled. Now it was time for the fun part.

Harry flew a short distance so he was still over the dome, but not over the house. He pulled a pebble out of his pocket and dropped it. Quickly casting the Magic Sight again, he watched the dome under him and saw no flare or any reaction. He pulled another pebble out and enlarged it so it was the size of his fist and dropped it. Again, there was no discernable reaction. He dropped the Magic Sight and waited a few minutes. No one came out to investigate. That also gave him time to really look at the house. It was very large and fancy, like something he would expect the Malfoys to live in.

Glancing at his watch, he saw he had left home almost an hour and a half ago. Taking a moment to look for landmarks again, Harry was satisfied he could easily find this. A very distinctively shaped pond helped to identify it. Satisfied, he checked the time on his watch and turned for home, racing the clock.

Just under an hour later, he was climbing into his bedroom window. As he closed it, Hermione walked in and closed his door.

"Well?" she whispered, very relieved to see him back.

"I found it and my tests worked. We need to allow an hour for flying, so Hedwig can leave ten minutes after me so I definitely have time to get away," he whispered back.

Hermione lit her wand with a Lumos and showed him the book. "You stopped here." There was a small "x" on the page.

He nodded.

"Are you still sure about this, Harry?" she asked worriedly. There were so many ways for this to go wrong.

"I am. No one hurts either of you and gets away with it. Lucius Malfoy will pay for what he did to us, even if Ginny wasn't a part of us until later. It almost killed me when you disappeared from our bond."

Hermione hugged him tightly. "I understand. If you had died in the Chamber, I don't know what it would have done to me, but I suspect it wouldn't have been pleasant." She paused for a moment. "That's the only reason I'm letting you do this."

"I'm sure it wouldn't've been pleasant for you, and thanks for letting me do this, Hermione." He gave her a hug and then a kiss on the cheek. In the weak light of her wand, she looked to be blushing furiously.

"Night, Harry," she said and quickly left for her room.

Harry smiled and got undressed. He would sleep late and they would double check their plan tomorrow. Tomorrow night he would "send a message" to Lucius Malfoy to demonstrate that his behaviour was unacceptable. It would have to be an unsigned message, but he would not shy away from protecting his family.

Harry looked at his watch as he hovered in the air. It was two minutes after one in the morning and he had to wait four more minutes. He had caught an unexpected tailwind. That was much better than a headwind as that would have made him late, but it did mean he would have it as a headwind on the return flight home.

He pulled the first of five pebbles out of his pocket and looked carefully at the manor house beneath him, trying to decide what his targets were. There were no lights on in the house to show him where people might be for him to avoid. He really did not want to hurt anyone, other than Lucius, no matter how much he might dislike Draco. He only wanted to cause damage and give the Aurors a good chance to look around and hopefully find something.

Checking his watch again, Harry saw it was time. He flew over his first target on the house. Concentrating carefully on the small rock, he cast "Engorgio" and held the spell even after the rock was so big it fell out of his hand, the weight increasing proportionally with the size. He ended the spell several seconds after it had left his hand, already falling, by which point the rock was the size of a small car. He flew a little to the left, reaching a new spot just as he heard the crash of the rock as it hit the house and went through the roof. With a smile, he performed the same trick with the second, third, and fourth rocks as quickly as he could on different parts of the house.

Finished with the house, he flew over to the small outbuilding and dropped the fifth enlarged rock. His mission complete, Harry pointed his broom towards home and raced away as fast as he could go.

Wilbur Smythe was manning the Auror desk for the night. As usual, he was having trouble staying awake. He had already read the Daily Prophet from yesterday and was working on another useless report. He wondered what would actually happen if he failed to submit the

report. It was not as if the earth would stop spinning or anything important.

He turned back to the report with a tired sigh just as a solid black owl came in the window. A glance at the wall clock showed it to be ten past one. It was highly unusual to receive an owl at this time of night; normally, they did not start arriving until after six in the morning.

The bird landed in front of him and stuck its leg out as it gave several barks as if to imply that the message was important. He harrumphed at the snooty bird. "There's water over there if you want it," he said absently as he opened the letter that was not addressed to anyone, written in a messy scrawl as if in haste.

Send help immediately to Malfoy Manor in Wiltshire. We're being attacked.

Smythe looked at it for a moment. "Malfoy Manor? Crap!" This was a personal friend of the Minister. He ran for the Floo to alert the on-duty Senior Auror, failing to notice the owl leaving as swiftly as it had arrived. "Gosse!" he yelled into the fireplace after he threw in some Floo Powder. His head spun for a brief moment before he saw an older man come over to the fireplace in the remote room.

"What is it, Smythe?" Gosse drawled, sounding unhappy to be bothered.

"I just got an owl from Malfoy Manor! It says they're being attacked," Smythe practically yelled in his excitement.

Gosse sighed. "Smythe, this is no time for jokes."

"I swear I'm not joking. An owl just delivered the note."

"Hold on." Gosse turned a little and threw some Floo Powder into the next fireplace. "Malfoy Manor." He watched the green flames go dark

and stood there for a couple of seconds in surprise. Urgency now hit him. "Shit! They're off the network." He turned back to the first fireplace. "All right, I'll take it. Track down Moody and get him to join us there post-haste." He turned and walked quickly to the barracks.

Throwing open the door, he lit all the lights. Many groans sounded. "Up and at 'em everyone. We've got an emergency."

People started rolling out of their bunks and putting their boots on. Of the dozen people there, about half of them were Auror cadets in training; the other half were Aurors with little seniority and who had to work the night shift.

"Is anyone here related to the Malfoys?" he loudly asked.

"I am," a feminine voice answered. "Narcissa Malfoy is my aunt."

"Tonks, is that you?" he asked one of the second year cadets.

"Yes, sir."

"Right, this half of the room, you're coming with me now. Li, you come with us too. The rest of you get ready in case you're called as backups. Let's go!" Gosse ordered and led them to the Portkey area.

He quickly looked up the coordinates, picked a yardstick from the conveniently-placed bin, and turned it into a Portkey to the front gate area. Going to his group, he held out the yardstick. "Everyone grab hold!" When the seventh hand touched it, he activated it with his wand. They arrived by the gates.

"Tonks, have you been here before?" Gosse growled quietly.

"Twice, sir."

"Can you open the gates?"

"I'll try, sir." Tonks walked forward and put her hand on the gates. To her surprise, they opened.

"Excellent. Everyone follow me, and Tonks -- stick next to me," Gosse commanded as he started jogging up the path to the house, where not a single light was shining.

A moment later, they all came to a halt and looked in surprise. Even in the low moonlight, it was obvious the house had been wrecked.

"Bloody hell!" one of the Aurors swore. "What did that? Giants?"

"I have no idea," Gosse said slowly. "Listen everyone. We got an owl asking for help, so there was at least one person alive. Search the structure and use your spells to locate living beings. Tonks, how many people should be here?"

"Uh, three, sir. Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco Malfoy. There should be a couple of house-elves, too."

"Spread around and start searching in pairs, and if you find anyone, bring them back here to the front. Be careful you don't get trapped yourself, the structure is probably unstable." Gosse looked at the house, hardly sure where to start. "Tonks, you're my partner and the liaison to the family."

A crunch on the gravel caused him to spin and pull his wand.

"A little slow there, aren'tcha Gosse? I had you in my sights for the last half minute," said a gravelly voice.

"Shit, Moody! Quit sneaking up on me, I'm not in the mood."

The old Auror chuckled. "Why did you call me here? I'm on first shift."

"May be, old friend, but as you can see, we need to search through Malfoy Manor for survivors. I thought your eye could be helpful, in more ways than one..." Gosse gave his old friend a sly grin.

Moody chuckled again. "Aye, I get your drift. I've always wanted to take a stroll through this house and see what I find." He walked towards the structure alone and carefully walked in.

A scream grabbed Gosse's attention. It was a little to the left. "This way, Tonks." A moment later, two Aurors came out of the building carrying a woman in a nightdress. She looked unconscious.

"Sorry, sir, she was fighting us, so we had to stun her to get her out. She says her son is still in there." The two set her down.

Gosse revived her and Mrs Malfoy looked wildly around.

"Tonks?" her superior prompted.

"Oh, yes, sir. Aunt Narcissa!"

The blonde woman looked around. "Nymphadora? Help me! Draco was in his room!"

Tonks ignored the usage of her first name with effort as she squatted down and grabbed the woman's hand. "We'll get him out, Aunt Narcissa. What about Uncle Lucius? Was he in the house?"

"He should be. I, I think he was in the study. Please, get Draco out!" she pleaded.

"Where's his bedroom?" Gosse asked.

"Second floor, that wing," Tonks pointed.

"What used to be the second floor, you mean," Gosse muttered, then

raised his voice. "You two, get another pair to join you and search that wing for the boy. Tonks, where's the study?"

"Uh," she thought for a few seconds before she pointed. "It's over there on the ground floor."

"Right, I'll get someone over there in a minute. Mrs Malfoy, are you injured?" Gosse asked.

Narcissa stared at him for a moment. "Please save Draco!"

Gosse brought his lit wand a little closer to her and looked at her face carefully. "I think she's in shock, maybe she even has a concussion. Tonks, stay here and keep her calm. I'll be back in a minute." He jogged to the other side of the house and found a pair of his team and had them start searching for Lucius. If they did not find everyone in a few minutes, he'd summon the rest of the on-call Aurors to help.

Hurrying back, he saw Tonks give the woman a cup of water and some calming words. He liked her thinking. "Mrs Malfoy, do you know what time this happened?"

She looked back at him. "I think I remember hearing the clock chime one, but after that I'm not sure."

Gosse worked the timing out in his head and things did not match up. "Did you send an owl to us requesting help?"

Narcissa seemed to think very hard. "No. Please, stop asking me questions and save Draco!"

"We're working on it, madam." Gosse thought about what was happening. Their house had been destroyed and there was no possible way an owl could have flown from here to the Ministry in the time available. Did someone else send the owl or was something "sinister" going on?

"Got him, sir!"

Gosse turned towards the shout. "Tonks, keep her sitting down," he commanded as he hurried over. He cast his light on the boy as he was floated the last bit. There was blood on his right leg and both legs looked a little funny.

"Two broken legs and some blood loss, not too much. He'll survive, but he needs to go to St Mungo's immediately," Auror Li told them as he set the boy down next to his mother.

"Draco? Draco?!" Narcissa called out to her son hysterically.

"He's unconscious, but we're going to take you both to the hospital." Gosse grabbed a foot-long chunk of wood from off the ground and turned it into a Portkey. "Tonks, use this to get them to St Mungo's. As soon as you have them checked in, return to the Ministry and bring the rest of the crew here. We're going to need more help to find Lucius in all of this."

"Yes, sir." Tonks Portkeyed the two Malfoys away.

Gosse shook his head. "Keep searching. Lucius is supposed to be here somewhere," he told those standing there. He walked around the house to find Mad-EyMad-Eye.

"Moody!" he yelled.

"In here," came the faint reply.

Gosse carefully went into the house. He noticed that several of the walls had been transfigured into stone. He assumed Moody had done that to help what was above them stay up. He found his old friend in what looked like a dining room. "Why are you just standing here?"

Moody was shining his wand around the floor. "Because there's a ward on this floor that my eye can't see through. I probably wouldn't have noticed it except for this hole in the floor over here. I haven't found a way down yet and I'm not too keen to just jump into a hole, especially in a house that may or may not stay up," he grumped.

Gosse looked in the hole with the light from his wand and did not see anything, other than there was a room of some kind down there. Many houses had basements, so this was not a surprise. Then he heard something. "Wait, be quiet a moment." He cast a Sonorus into the hole. They both clearly heard moaning. He ended the spell.

"Well, I'd say we found Lucius, but either he's lost something between his legs or he has some female guests here," Moody said with a grin.

"Damn it! This is getting more complicated all the time." Gosse looked at Moody. "You might as well know now that the owl we got telling us about this wasn't sent by Narcissa."

Moody looked thoughtful for a moment. "You're suggesting this was a setup? That someone wanted us to search this house?"

"I don't know," Gosse warily admitted. "But it does seem like a possibility, and I can't think of any other reason that fits the facts I know so far."

"Lad, I'd keep that opinion to yourself for the moment. Let's get all the facts and then see what we have."

"Are you saying we don't want to point out there was foul play here?"

Moody shook his head. "No, there's no doubt about foul play. This much damage was deliberate, but if there was a secondary motive, beyond wasting some of Malfoy's money to repair a house, you might

not want to be the one saying that ... if you know what I mean."

Gosse considered that. "Shit, this could be a political hot potato."

"Aye, but less likely could be and more likely will be."

"I'll take your advice for now. Why don't you lower me into that hole and let me see if I can find some stairs for you."

"I can do that." Moody limped over and then levitated Gosse down into the hole.

A minute later, Gosse was through the hole and standing in what could only be a rather large work room. Support beams had come down all over the place, but there was no body visible. The moaning was louder though. He saw some stairs in the corner and went up them. A moment later, he was lifting a trapdoor that showed he was in the dining room. "Moody? I think you can make it down here."

"Aye." Moody hobbled over and came down to join the search.

Gosse searched for the moans and found two naked young women in less than perfect condition lying in what looked like cells. A quick spell showed neither had a magical core. "Aw, shit. This just keeps getting worse and worse."

A thump got his attention. "What did you find, laddie?"

"Two Muggle girls, naked and probably abused, locked up in what looks like cells. Can you believe it?"

"Oh, aye, easily. Would you believe I found a Death Eater mask and several illegal poisons, as well as enough cursed items to send him away for the next ten years or more without anything else?"

Gosse shook his head. "After seeing those two prisoners, I do.

There's a few more years in Azkaban for him as a minimum. They don't look too injured, so I think I'll leave them here for a few minutes. What about Lucius?"

"Oh, I found him too, but I'll need your help. He's pinned beneath a beam but good," Moody said.

"Right, let's get him first." Gosse followed Moody back. Ten minutes later, Moody was floating an unconscious Malfoy in Auror manacles back upstairs, while Gosse went to get the girls. He would send Li and a few others back down here to get all the evidence, along with Moody to make sure they missed nothing. If he had anything to say about it, Lucius would not get away from these charges. That gave him an idea, a face-splitting grin of an idea.

Gosse conjured robes on them and then took the two girls up top. He directed Li and three other Aurors into the secret basement for an investigation, and to bring the report directly to him, Moody, or Bones, and no one else. He put Moody in charge of the scene for a few minutes and took Lucius and the two girls to St Mungo's, along with two of the Auror recruits.

The recruits stood guard over Lucius while he was getting care. Gosse took the Muggle girls to the special ward where Muggles were treated while evidence was collected, and then they would be held only until they could be Obliviated and returned to their homes. He stayed just long enough to get a preliminary report on their condition. The Healer confirmed they had been sexually assaulted.

His watch showed it to be close to three in the morning. He was going to have to hurry, but if he could make it, Fudge would never be able to get his good friend Lucius Malfoy free of these charges. With careful thought, Gosse put on a few glamours and Apparated to the main offices of the Daily Prophet, where a "senior Ministry official" had some interesting news for the people. Thirty minutes later, Gosse returned to the crime scene.

Nearly an hour-and-a-half earlier a tired twelve year-old boy had crawled into bed after a long flight, and across the hallway a relieved thirteen year-old girl had closed a map book and shut off her wand -- both were satisfied and sleeping soundly.

The next morning after his broken night of sleep, a somewhat groggy Harry Potter went down to breakfast. An only slightly more awake Hermione Granger looked up from her newspaper and smiled slightly.

"No problems last night?" she asked in an innocent voice that did not make him look up.

"No," he answered as he wearily grabbed a bowl and some cereal.

"So now that you've done it and I can't stop you, what did you actually do?" she casually asked.

"I, uh, I enlarged five pebbles to the size of a car and dropped them onto his house from a few hundred feet up," he answered hesitantly, afraid of what she was going to say. "Because I didn't use that much power, it should have worn off after a few minutes so they wouldn't find the boulders. Or at least it wore off and the rock shrank back down after about three minutes in practice."

Hermione surprised him and only nodded. "Well, your plan seems to have worked, as unorthodox as it was." She put the newspaper in her hands down in front of him.

Harry stared at the huge picture of a destroyed house. It was obvious the picture had been taken in the dark and enhanced to make the details visible, but what it showed was amazing. It would be an almost total loss. Even more interesting was the headline: Lucius

Malfoy's Manor and Reputation Destroyed!

"I guess I got lucky?"

"Read it," she suggested as she cleaned up after herself.

Harry found it interesting that she did not seem too bothered by it all. The article said the house had been destroyed early this morning and that Lucius Malfoy had been found with two Muggle girls in captivity, both malnourished and having been repeatedly sexually assaulted. Also found in a secret room was a Death Eater mask, along with various illegal poisons and numerous illegal Dark artefacts. If convicted of it all, Malfoy would be spending at least the next thirty years in Azkaban. It went on to say that his wife and son had suffered minor injuries as well, but both were expected to recover and be released from St Mungo's tomorrow.

"Too bad about Draco and his mum, but I'm glad of the rest." He looked at her as she calmly sat there and looked at him. "Hermione, say something." He was starting to get a little scared.

She sighed. "Harry, I do understand why you felt like you had to do this," her voice suddenly rose to a shout, "but you could have killed three people!"

Harry looked at the paper for a moment as he surveyed the picture again. "And how many people did Malfoy almost kill, Hermione?" He looked up when she did not answer. "Colin, Justin, Penny, you, me, and Ginny. That's six. I could count Ron, too, as he almost got buried by rocks in trying to rescue Ginny. Really, I'd have to count attempted murder with a basilisk on every person at Hogwarts, all the students and staff and even their pets. I don't like Draco, but I didn't want him dead, nor his mother. Lucius Malfoy didn't care who died when he gave that diary to Ginny, probably with the exception of his son. In fact, I'm almost sure he wanted Ginny to die."

"But Harry..."

"But nothing, Hermione," Harry said forcefully. "It's been over a month and no one has done a thing about Malfoy. Yeah, we can't prove it, but I bet even if we could, Fudge would get him off with a small fine at most. If they were going to punish him for it, they should have done something by now."

"But is it really your place to play judge, jury, and executioner?" she asked pointedly.

"It is my place as Head of the Potters to protect my family. I will protect you and Ginny from everyone! I'll protect our parents too. I'll also protect the Weasleys, although I might hesitate with Mrs Weasley because of what she's doing to Ginny right now. Hermione," Harry pleaded with her, "please understand that family is very important to me. As much as I want to be normal, I know I really can't be; but I can have a family and I will protect them."

Hermione sat for a moment in thought before she got up and came around the table. She pulled Harry into a hug as he sat, with his face next to her stomach, and held him tightly. "Part of me doesn't like it Harry, but I do understand. I won't say anything more about this if you'll promise not to do something like this again."

Harry held her just as tightly around her waist. "I'd like to, but I can't promise that Hermione. I will protect you with all that I am, with all that I have. I can't tell you what it was like with you not there. I could say it was like having my wand arm cut off, but even that's not enough. It really hurt, and Malfoy wouldn't have cared if you had died. He'll never know I did this, but I will. I will know that I protected my family from the likes of him, at least for the next thirty years."

Hermione lowered herself so she was sitting on his lap. Harry was surprised to see tears running down her cheeks. "Thank you, Harry. I'm sorry I forgot what it was like to be you." She kissed his cheek.

"Let's compromise. First, promise me you'll be careful so I don't lose you. Second, promise me you'll let me help you plan these in the future, so if something goes wrong we'll share the blame equally."

"Always," he fervently told her.

Ginny came down to breakfast early. She had had trouble sleeping and did not know why. At some point during the early morning hours, she had wakened and felt a slight weakening, like she might faint, except it was not quite strong enough for that. The feeling had pulsed strangely several times and then simply disappeared.

On the dining table, she saw a copy of the Daily Prophet. The headline with Lucius Malfoy's name in it grabbed her attention. She snatched up the paper and hurried back to her room to read it. This was the sort of thing her mother generally did not allow her to see.

Sitting on her bed, she read the article. Her smile grew the more she read. By the end, she was exceedingly happy and she was all but certain who she had to thank for this happening. She was going to hug the stuffing out of him for doing this for her.

"Ginny? Time to get up and come down for breakfast so you can start working," her mother called.

That almost ruined her good mood, but she did her best to shrug off her tribulations here. Someone did care for her very much. Ginny hid the newspaper; she wanted to keep that as a reminder of how special someone was.

Cornelius Fudge threw the morning newspaper down on his desk in fury. Those buffoons, he thought. "A Senior Ministry Official indeed,"

he swore. If the news had not been published where the entire Wizengamot could read it, he probably could have buried the Auror report. As it was, there was no way he could save Lucius now.

Then the thought of Lucius on the witness stand filled him with dread. He would have to be very careful to make sure Lucius was not given Veritaserum. That could be disastrous.

He again wondered who had leaked the information...

Albus Dumbledore set the morning newspaper down as he finished his breakfast in his private chambers. A smile graced his lips and a twinkle danced in his eyes. As Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, he could make sure Lucius stood trial.

While this was a surprise and not what he would have preferred to have happened, Albus wondered if a little time in Azkaban would help Lucius to see the error of his ways and repent. He could always hope.

Albus could also read between the lines, as well as look at the picture. This act of destruction was deliberate. It was also quite probable that the destruction of the house was meant to let Aurors in to search for illegal artefacts. Having those Muggle girls locked up in the basement would be hard to get out of, especially in light of Arthur Weasley's new Muggle Protection Act passed this last year.

That thought led him to consider that to a few people, it was generally accepted that Lucius had been behind the giving of the diary to young Miss Weasley, even if they could not prove it. Had one of those few taken matters into their own hands? He considered that. He also looked at the picture again, baffled by how the damage had been done. It would take a lot of magic, perhaps as much or more than he had. Giants could have easily done that, but the article had

been clear that no evidence of giants had been found.

He finished breakfast and put on his purple and yellow robes to go to the Ministry. He would ponder the mystery of "who" and "why" when he had more time. For now, he had to deal with the "what" and nothing more.

That evening as dinner was finished, Hermione pulled a letter out of her pocket and handed it to her mother. She looked at her father. "Professor Flitwick says there is no translation spell to help you speak another language or to learn it faster."

Emma finished the short letter before folding it and handing it back. "I have tomorrow morning off. I will endeavour to locate a university student whose major study is French and can act as a tutor a couple of evenings a week. I'll also see if I can find some introductory books and language tapes. How does that sound?"

Hermione smiled. "That will be a good start. We can work on it during our trip too, as we'll be surrounded by French-speaking people."

Three days later, there was a knock at the front door. A few minutes later, Emma led a dark-haired young woman in her early twenties into the living room. "These are my children and your students, Hermione and Harry. Kids, this is your tutor, Marie Bernard, who actually grew up in France."

"Good evening Hermione and Harry, I'm pleased to meet you," the young woman said in flawless English with only a hint of an accent.

((A/N: Even though Harry may be listening to Hermione more often, he's still a Gryffindor at heart: Boldly going where Aurors fear to tread. :))

Chapter 9 - Assimilating Number Two

Arthur Weasley was enjoying a nice dinner with most of his family as the month of July ended. Only his two oldest children were not there. As usual, his wife had fixed a truly wonderful meal consisting of a roast and vegetables from their own garden. Almost everyone seemed to be happily talking, the exception being his youngest. She concerned him more than he was comfortable admitting. This had not been a good year for her -- neither at school nor at home.

The school year had been marred by a cursed diary given to her at the end of last summer. They believed Lucius Malfoy had given it to her, but it was not possible to prove that. Most interestingly, a few weeks ago, Malfoy Manor had been destroyed and Malfoy had been caught with his pants down, legally speaking. After his quick trial, he had been sentenced to thirty-five years in Azkaban.

After Ginny had almost been killed in the Chamber of Secrets, and then rescued at the last minute by Harry Potter, she had had a disagreement with her mother on whether to come home immediately or wait until the end of the school year. Molly had not taken kindly to being put in a position where she was told "no" in front of others -- and Arthur understood that to an extent -- so she had punished Ginny severely over the summer with many chores. Arthur had stepped in not long after Ginny came home to stop the redundant lectures, but then as now, even he could see trouble brewing with Ginny. While he could simply put his foot down and make Molly stop, he had learned years ago to do that only in the most critical of cases. This left him wondering what needed to be done. At this moment, he believed that the best course was to get Ginny back to school and let time dull the issue.

As cake was being served, a tawny owl flew in and landed in front of Ginny. That surprised Arthur as most people sent their letters in the evening so the normally nocturnal owls could fly at night, not to mention night being a better time for the owls so the Muggles would

not see them. Everyone watched Ginny pull two letters from the owl and give it a scrap of roast as a thank you. Arthur was distressed to see Molly looking upset to see Ginny receive a letter, but he was thankful she said nothing -- for the moment.

Ginny looked at the two letters and held one out. "This one is for you, Dad."

"For me?" Arthur reached out and took the proffered letter.

"Whose owl is that?" Ron asked.

"This is Archimedes. He belongs to the Grangers," she answered absently as she opened her letter and began reading.

Arthur opened his letter, assuming it was from Hermione's parents, but he was to be surprised.

Dear Mr Weasley,

I would like to invite Ginny over to my house for this week and the first part of next week. If this is acceptable, we are going to be at Diagon Alley in the morning and you could meet us at the Leaky Cauldron with Ginny. We expect to be there at 9am, and after running our brief errands would take her home with us.

If possible, we would like her to stay until the evening of the 10th, which would allow her to be home for her birthday. I hope you'll say yes, as I would really like to spend time with one of my best friends and show her a little of the Muggle world, as well as give her a break from the rest of her summer.

So my parents will know whether to wait for her, please send a reply back with our owl this evening. They have expressed their own personal interest in meeting Ginny, as they are as curious about Wizarding customs as your daughter is about Muggle ones.

I sincerely hope you'll let Ginny do this.

Hermione Granger
(Emma Granger)

P.S. Harry requests that, if possible, you kindly meet us tomorrow morning even if Ginny can't stay with us. He says he has something important to talk to you about, and wants to do so in person.

Arthur considered the letter carefully, fully aware of the scrutinizing looks his wife was giving him. The boys were looking at Ginny as she read her letter, giving him a little reprieve. He appreciated the fact that Emma had signed the letter, giving the invitation more legitimacy. He was also well aware that the letter was far more than an invitation. It told him that Ginny had been telling her friend or friends what her summer was like, and he did not have to wonder very hard what those letters might have said. He knew Ginny was very unhappy this summer. The postscript was merely one more interesting point, going so far as being ominous given the implications of correspondence between the girls. He could only think of a couple of likely things Harry might seek him out to discuss, and none of them were good, at least at this time.

"What does it say, Arthur?" Molly asked.

He folded the letter and put it in his robes, noticing that Ginny was also putting hers away, and that she had a smile on her face. That reinforced his last thought. Before his sons could pester their little sister, he decided to grab the figurative dragon by the tail and try to prevent a few problems. "Ginny? Hermione has asked if you would like to spend the next week with her at her house. Would you like to do that?" Every head swivelled to him.

"She can't, Arthur. Have you forgotten that she is grounded for the summer?" Molly's voice rose slightly, as if not believing that her

husband could have forgotten.

"I have not forgotten, Molly, but that is a discussion for us to have later," he calmly brushed her concern away, knowing that was like waving a red flag in front of a hippogriff. "Would you like to go, Ginny?"

"Yes, Daddy, very much so," she said with a big smile.

Arthur was saddened that it was the first of the summer, or at least the first that he could remember.

"Arthur, I forbid it," Molly said sternly.

Just as calmly as before, Arthur said, "Boys, if you will go to your rooms for a bit, please. Ginny, please remain."

"But, Dad, I was just starting on my cake!" Ron protested.

"And if you are still hungry in an hour, you may come back down and have some. For the moment, please go to your room." He gave them all a stern look and they quickly obeyed, understanding their mother was about to be unhappy and it was best not to be present when that happened. While all the boys left, Ron was the only one to take his cake with him.

Arthur smiled at Ginny before looking at his wife. He was going to have to put his foot down as head of the house, whether he liked it or not. "Molly, I believe Ginny's punishment has gone on long enough. I understood your anger at the scene in Dumbledore's office, but Ginny had a point, too. I agree that it would have been better for that discussion to be in private, but she had a need to stay at school for the final weeks."

"And I wanted her to come home then and there, and she had no place telling me, her mother, no," Molly protested strongly.

"I've agreed that it could have been handled better, but tell me why you are so insistent on punishing her. What are you trying to teach her after five weeks of double chores?" he asked.

"She needs to learn that I am her mother and I know what's best for her. She is still a little girl," Molly said forcefully.

Arthur looked at his daughter and saw anger in her eyes. "If she is still a little girl, then why are you not treating her as such? Little girls do not spend ten hours a day doing housework. Little girls write letters and play with their friends. They skip around the house and play with their family. You have forbidden her to do half of those things, and I have not seen her do the other half because you have removed all the joy in her life this summer."

"Little girls would have come home with their mother when asked," Molly objected.

"And done what, Molly?" he asked tiredly. "What would her coming home a month early from school have accomplished?" He watched his wife get more upset.

"We'll never know how much I could have helped her because she didn't obey me."

Arthur thought that was circular reasoning, but left it alone for now. "Ginny, what have you learned from your punishment?"

"I've learned not to have a large family unless I have a house-elf," Ginny said levelly, although it was obvious how much effort it cost to remain civil.

He could not help it, Arthur cracked a grin and chuckled, eliciting a glare from his wife. "I can understand that. Did you learn anything else?"

"No, Dad; or at least nothing that I wish to share."

Arthur thought that was bold of her, but he understood. She was a mixture of Bill's bravery and the twins' scheming, a truly scary combination when he thought of it. "Thank you for your honesty, Ginny. As head of this household, I hereby cancel the rest of your punishment."

"Arthur!"

He ignored his wife for the moment. "I will say that you are to mind yourself and keep out of trouble lest I reinstate it," he finished, barely suppressing a smile as he watched his daughter's face light up. "Moreover, in the future, if you wish to disagree with whatever your mother or I clearly want you to do and we are in public, you will politely ask that we discuss the issue in private. If we are not in public, you will still politely request to discuss the matter. I give you my word that we will honour that request," Arthur said while shooting a firm glance at Molly, "even if we may not change our minds."

"Thanks, Dad!" Ginny jumped up and ran over to him and gave him a big hug. "And tomorrow?"

"Be ready to go at a quarter to nine. Go on upstairs now, and pack to stay until the tenth. Also, please take the owl with you and send a reply back saying that we'll be there. I'll even do the dishes for you, my dear." He was rewarded with another hug and a squeal as she picked up the owl and hurried out of the room and up the stairs.

"Arthur! Do you realize what you've done?" Molly looked beside herself in anger.

"Yes, Molly, I do. I let you run this household because you do a good job most of the time. However, this time you went too far, so I've cancelled a punishment you really should never have meted out, or

else should have had a much shorter time limit."

"But..."

"Molly, did you not hear a word Ginny has said?" he asked in a frustrated voice. "Did you not hear her tonight, for the last five weeks, or even in Dumbledore's office?"

"But she must be trained," Molly insisted.

"If we got a new dog, it would be proper to train it by tempering its spirit, not by breaking it. A person is much more complex than a pet, but even I can tell that you've been breaking Ginny's spirit. She is no longer the vivacious girl we once had." He shook his head slowly as he thought about what had happened to his daughter. "I know part of the change is what happened to her with that damn diary, but she was mostly normal when we met her off the train. She changed the moment she came home and the punishment is why. Did you not hear her answer? She said she learned nothing from the punishment, therefore it was a worthless punishment."

"That's because you wouldn't let me lecture her."

"You lectured her for three days, Molly. If she had not understood by then, she never was going to understand. It was doing more harm than good."

"I completely disagree. You don't understand her because you're not around the children enough," she said angrily.

Arthur blinked as if slapped, not believing what he had just heard. They had both wanted a large family and he did his part in providing for them as best he could. What did she expect of him? He knew he did not spend as much time with his children as he would have liked, but he could easily say he knew all about human nature. "Molly, let's pretend for just a moment that you work very hard and fix the best

meal you can every day for this family."

"I already do."

"I know," he said with a smile as he set her up, curious as to what her reaction was going to be. "Pretend that every day after you've slaved away in the kitchen, I tell you that it's not bad, but it could be lot better. And I do that day after day, week after week, and month after month, even though you are doing your very best. How would you feel?" he asked and waited.

She huffed. "I would consider you to be the most ungrateful and inconsiderate person I'd ever met."

"Would you resent me for my comments?" Arthur asked innocently.

"Of course I would."

"And you've been telling Ginny for the past five weeks that she's not good enough, no matter how hard she's tried. She feels she did nothing wrong to you. I'm sure she feels guilty about what happened at school, but you're not helping her to get over her bad feelings about that. All you do is yell at her for not coming home when there was nothing you could really do for her."

"And you think she's resenting me? For trying to help her?" Molly was incredulous.

"Oh, no, my dear. I don't think that at all, I'm actually quite sure she resents you at the moment." Molly went wide-eyed, her anger returning. "You see, dear, tonight is the first time I've seen her smile and be happy since she came home from school ... the first time. I believe you need to think about that." Arthur pulled out his wand and walked into the kitchen, everything on the table floating after him. As he left the room, Arthur noticed that his wife was sitting there in shock. He hoped he had managed to reach her in a way that would truly

help.

Arthur grabbed Ginny's bag and stepped into the fireplace. A moment later, he came out of the fireplace in the Leaky Cauldron. He waited for his daughter and cleaned the ashes off both of them before looking around. He need not have bothered trying to find her friends as they found Ginny. Hermione was the first to hug Ginny, and then Harry did. Arthur wondered about the length of hug there, but found it more amusing than anything else. Then he heard his daughter say "Happy belated birthday" and understanding dawned. He also noticed Hermione's mother approaching.

"Emma," he nodded to her.

"Arthur," she held out her hand and they shook, something Arthur was not used to with women in the Wizarding World.

"Thank you, Mr Weasley," Hermione said, pulling his attention down.

"You're quite welcome, Hermione. I thought your idea was a good one and Ginny heartily approved," he replied jovially.

"Don't worry, we'll all take good care of her," Emma promised.

Arthur smiled. "Of that, I have no doubt, not after this last year." He looked at Harry and gave him a smile and firm clap on the shoulder. "Thank you again for saving my daughter, Harry."

"It was my pleasure." Harry looked a little hesitant after answering.

"Did you still want to speak with me, Harry?" Arthur had wondered whether the boy's request would stand only if Ginny had not come or if there was more. He had recently heard some news from Azkaban that concerned Harry, but that news had not yet become public knowledge. He did not think Harry could have heard that yet.

"Actually, yes. Could we sit down in the corner over there for a few minutes?"

"Certainly." He looked at the others. "If you ladies will excuse us men for a moment?" He got a chuckle and two giggles before he led Harry to the side.

"Could you please put a privacy charm around us, Mr Weasley?" Harry politely asked when they sat down.

Arthur was surprised but did the charm anyway. When he finished, a very serious young man sat in front of him.

"Mr Arthur Weasley and head of the Weasley Family, I, Harry James Potter and head of the Potter family, wish to give you a formal notice."

Arthur felt as if he were about to have a heart attack. A formal family greeting and notice? That eliminated all other preconceived ideas he had about his discussion other than two. He hoped for the better but unexpected one: a contract.

"Last May I, head of the Potter family, risked my personal life to save your daughter. When I did, tradition states that a Life Debt was created between our families. I now give you notice that I formally recognize that Life Debt to exist."

Arthur blinked slowly and swallowed hard. It was not the notice he had been hoping for. When he had first read that postscript, he had sincerely hoped that Harry did not know about this tradition. Now, all he could do was hope the price was not too high. "I acknowledge the tradition and acknowledge your right, Mr Potter," he answered as tradition demanded. "What do you ask?"

"At this time, I merely give notice and will let the Debt ride indefinitely."

It was all Arthur could do not to wilt in relief.

"However, the indefinite postponement has a condition." Harry was still completely serious. "The punishment that Ginny received this summer will never happen again. She will be on her best behaviour, but punishment where none is due will not be tolerated or I will call in the Debt immediately and your daughter will become a part of my family. At that time, you will no longer have any control over her. You are her father and head of house at the moment, and you will make sure she is treated lovingly as long as she is there. While she is still a minor, if punishments are required, they will fit the deed and no more. Do you agree to this, Mr Weasley?"

What could he say? Harry was totally within his traditional rights to demand many things, up to and including Ginny. His condition of postponement was even very reasonable. It was the suddenness of it all that was so shocking. To add to the shock, the tradition also had no age limit, so a thirteen year-old boy could do this, since he was the head of his house. He slowly nodded. "It shall be as you ask, Mr Potter." He smiled slightly. "Perhaps it is best that Ginny stay with you for the next week. My wife will not be pleased to hear this."

Harry's seriousness cracked and he smiled. "I don't envy you that, but she must be made to understand. Ginny thinks the world of you, Mr Weasley. It's her mother's actions this summer that have caused me to do this. If it will help, tell her that."

Arthur laughed a mirthless laugh. "I think not, or at least not that directly."

"It's your family, sir," Harry replied with a formal nod. "While not part of my formal discussion with you, I will also say that from time to time, I may do or buy things for Ginny because I want to or because I think it will make her happy. If I do, they are a gift to her without obligation and she will keep them, freely and without pressure to return them."

Arthur nodded. "As you wish. However, I suggest you be careful with my youngest son. He's likely to become jealous and upset when he finds out." He paused for a moment. "I'll explain to him that a gift is for the pleasure of the giver and the recipient, and such a gift is not charity. Hopefully, that will help a bit."

"Thank you. I'm sorry I had to do this," Harry stuck out his hand, "but thank you for making this not as hard as I had imagined it could be. I'm only doing this for Ginny's happiness."

Arthur reached out and gripped the smaller hand, giving and receiving a firm handshake. "I'm sorry you were forced into this, too. You should know that I cancelled the rest of Ginny's punishment last night. That aside, I'd like to extend an invitation to you and Hermione to join us for the last week of summer, as you did last year."

Harry grinned. "Thank you, we'd love to. I'm sure my mother won't mind, but we should ask her." He and Arthur stood together, before Arthur took down his charm. Harry gave a goofy grin and a wink to Hermione, who squealed and hugged Ginny. Both girls were very obviously happy, and Emma looked at them consideringly.

"Mum? Mr Weasley has invited Hermione and me over for the last week of the summer like last year. May we?" Harry queried.

"I don't see why not," Emma said, causing her to be hugged by each of her children. She looked at the man who was smiling at her.

"I'll tell my wife to expect them in few weeks, and we'll get them to the train as well."

"Thank you, Arthur. Well, kids, shall we go shopping while we're here?" Emma received an excited chorus of "yes".

Ginny gave her father a quick hug and then joined the Granger family.

Harry slung the strap to Ginny's bag over his shoulder and followed them. Hermione used her wand and opened the doorway into Diagon Alley. Arthur shook his head a bit as he watched them walk away, before heading for the Floo to reach the Ministry and his job.

The trio of students first went to Gringotts. Emma was about to exchange some Pounds for Galleons until Harry stopped her. "Please Mum, let me take care of this. It's really not all that much and you do so much for me."

"Harry, you're our responsibility. A few books and robes won't hurt us," she tried to patiently explain.

"Please?" He wanted them to start getting used to him taking care of Hermione. The two of them had decided this was a good way to prepare her parents for learning of the bond later.

"For now since you have Galleons and I only have Pounds, but we may pay you back," she said mischievously.

Harry grinned and walked up to a counter. "I'd like to go to this vault," he said as he put his key down, "and I understand I have a family vault too, which I would also like to visit." He had only recently found out about the family vault when writing to Gringotts. Hermione had suggested he ask because he was from an "old family". He had been surprised the goblins had told him there was indeed such a vault, but that was all they would say unless he visited in person.

The goblin picked up the key and held it for a moment. "You have full privileges with this vault." He handed the key back and looked at Harry sternly. "You may not remove anything from your family vault until you are seventeen."

"But..."

The goblin did not let him finish his objection. "It is the law and part of

the treaty, Wizard."

"Excuse me," Hermione quickly spoke up. "You said that he could not remove anything from it, but can he visit it?"

Harry looked at her. "Why?"

She put a hand on his arm to stop him.

The goblin seemed unhappy to say it, but he said, "You may visit." He called another goblin over, who took the four of them to the carts, after Harry purchased three money bags for a Sickle each. Emma was looking at Harry and Hermione very curiously, as was Ginny.

"Why would we visit if we can't take anything?" Harry whispered as they got into a cart.

"Because, Harry. You may find information in there that is useful..." She started to shriek as the cart suddenly shot forward. Emma joined her, while Harry and Ginny laughed. The goblin seemed delighted at scaring two of them, at least.

After several minutes of a ride which was thrilling for Harry and Ginny while leaving Hermione and Emma quite pale, the cart pulled up to a vault with what looked like a large door. The goblin walked up to the door and waved his hands over it, ending the gestures by a drawing a clawed finger down the middle. The opening split and a pair of double doors opened. Even Harry was impressed as this vault was at least five or six times bigger than his school vault, and this one was mostly filled with Galleons.

"Bloody hell..." Ginny breathed, echoing the sentiments all of them were thinking as they stared in amazement.

The goblin waved his hand and a light haze or film covered the entire doorway, breaking their stupor. "Remember, you may not take

anything out of the vault."

"Can all of us enter, or can only Harry enter?" Hermione asked.

"All may enter," the goblin answered as he stood by the doorway.

Harry slowly walked in, followed by the other three. Inside the door, they found a set of shelves, which was almost the only thing in the vault other than coins.

Hermione joined him and walked over to the shelves, since they were the first interesting thing she saw. There, she saw an envelope with Harry's name on it, so she picked it up and handed it to him. While he opened it, Hermione continued to look at the things on the shelves.

Ginny came over and examined the shelves as well. Emma just stood back and watched, still amazed as to what her "son" had -- starting to come to grips with what it meant to be an "old family" in the Wizarding World.

Opening the letter, Harry read:

Dear Harry,

If you are reading this, then something has happened to your mother and me. I can't express how difficult it is to write something like this, especially as we hold you in our arms at barely a year old. There are so many things I want to tell you, but fear I'll never get the chance to. If you are having to meet me through this letter, then my fears were justified. Your mother feels the fear and concern even more strongly, which is why I'm writing this.

The most important thing I can tell you is that we both love you more than anything else in the world. We sincerely hope we can be there for you as you grow up. Why do I sound as if I think that may not

happen? That leads me to some other important things I must share with you.

Not long ago, Albus Dumbledore came to us and told us some information that is disturbing, frustrating, and sad. I cannot write it in this letter. If you don't know what I am referring, please go talk to him about it. Show him this letter and make him explain. (Albus -- this is my command!) Because of this, we have brought a few important family heirlooms here, and we are about to go into hiding to keep you safe.

As you are reading this, you should be seventeen, or perhaps near it. My best friend Sirius Black should have raised you and explained much about your mother and me. You should have already seen our Will as Wilkes & Wilkes should have taken care of everything, but if you have not for some strange reason, an official copy of it is here. There is also a list of the properties we own here. Make yourself comfortable in one of them.

At seventeen, I would not be surprised to know that you have a girl you've set your sights on already. It took me a lot of effort, but by the end of our sixth year, your mother and I were dating and we married not long after we finished Hogwarts. If you have someone you love, Harry, guard her, cherish her, and love her, but never push her away. It is only through love that you find who you truly are.

One last bit of advice: Don't forget to have fun! If Albus hasn't given it to you yet, I lent him my Invisibility Cloak, which is a family heirloom. Get it from him and pull a few pranks for me. I'm sure Sirius has trained you well in them.

Love,
Your Dad & Mum

Harry had tears streaming down his face as he finished the letter, holding it in a shaking hand. He sniffled and looked up just in time to

see both girls come to him and pull him into a hug. A moment later, Emma came over and joined the group hug.

"Are you going to be all right, Harry?" Emma asked him as she slowly stroked a hand over his head.

He nodded. "I will be. I just wish I could take this letter with me."

Hermione let go and started to dig in the inside pockets of her robes. She finally came up with a stack of parchment. Peeling the top sheet off, she pulled out her wand and cast the duplicating charm on the document and then the blank. She smiled at him. "I wondered if this would be needed. You can put the original back and take this copy for now."

Harry did that and then engulfed Hermione in a hug. "Thank you!" he fervently told her in a hoarse whisper.

Hermione blushed as he let her go. Her mother was smiling while Ginny looked like she was very pleased for him. Taking charge, Hermione looked at the other two females. "Ginny, will you please unroll that tapestry leaning against the shelves and see what it is? Mum, help me look through this box of documents; we need to see what's in here. Harry, look around to see if there is anything else you feel you want to know about right now. I see a box of jewellery, but you can't do anything with that, and there are likely to be other family treasures here."

They all got to work. Harry did a quick inventory. Most of the shelves were boxes of documents. Many of those were labelled investments, which he ignored for now -- Hermione and Emma could look at those later. He also found a few personal things, most of which were meaningless to him, other than they came from some part of his family.

Hermione and her mother were going through a box of properties,

with Hermione using the duplication charm to copy the information to a notebook she had brought just for this.

"Harry? Can you help me with this please?" Ginny called to him. When he came over, she whispered, "You need to see this. It's a self-updating family tree, but you need to hide this for now." She pointed to the bottom as it was spread around her.

Harry looked. All the Potters on there but one had both birth and death dates, showing him to truly be the last Potter. Finally, he saw what Ginny meant. Next to his name were two dotted lines, one to "Hermione Jean Granger" and one to "Ginevra Molly Weasley". He helped her to quickly roll it back up and return it to its place.

About the same time, the Granger women finished. "I think that's about all for now," Hermione said. "We can return some other time to look at the other less important things."

Harry nodded. "Thanks for copying everything, Hermione." He gave her a quick hug, leading to another blush from her, and then he led them out, allowing the goblin to secure the vault. Once back in the cart, Harry handed his school vault key over to the goblin, who took them to that vault.

Once the door to his school vault was opened, Harry walked straight in and began filling the three sacks he had. He came back out to find the girls, especially Ginny, staring in amazement.

"You have that much available to you now?" the redhead squeaked.

"Yes," he said brightly. "Now it's time for shopping."

Back in the lobby, Harry converted enough Galleons for a thousand Pounds, making Emma scowl as she wondered what he was up to, but it was done before she could stop him.

They went to the bookstore and loaded up. Even Emma bought several books. The three students bought their school books for the coming year, since Hermione had told Ginny to bring her school list. The Potions kits were easy to obtain and Harry bought some owl treats for Hedwig while he was at school. Emma bought treats for their supply at home, too.

The most difficult part of the trip was at Madam Malkin's. Harry had paid for everything so far, much to Emma's and Ginny's protests. When getting robes for next year, Ginny protested even more.

Ginny pulled Harry off to the side so they could whisper in private. "Harry, you can't keep buying me things. My parents will notice!"

Harry stood right beside her and whispered into her ear. "It doesn't matter. I already told your Dad that I was going to be buying you gifts and they were not to pressure you into returning them."

"But Harry, Mum will be livid...probably start calling me a scarlet woman and who knows what else."

Harry moved over so he was right in front of her and staring into her eyes. "Ginny, you are mine," he whispered, causing her to blush, but he did not let her look away. "You already know that your mother's opinion doesn't matter to you or to me. As long as you are true to me, you will always be a wonderful person."

Ginny threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly. "Thank you, Harry."

"Come on," he encouraged her. "My girls will look their best," he said half-teasingly before taking her back to be fitted for new robes.

For the first time in her life, Ginny had new school robes and she felt like she was a princess. Hermione had always had new robes, but the attention Harry paid to her made her feel like a princess, too.

Emma stood back and watched, giving all that she saw a great deal of thought.

On the way home from Diagon Alley, the three students sat in the back of the car as Emma drove and listened in. The mother could not fail to miss that Harry sat in the middle and had none of the usual "boys don't like girls" feelings that most boys his age had. In fact, he had been friendly with both girls all day long.

"So, what was France like?" Ginny asked with a hint of concern.

"It was very interesting," Hermione answered first. "We saw lots of old sites, including a few castles."

"None as big or cool as Hogwarts," Harry quickly added.

"No, but Beauxbatons was still very impressive. It was built in the early Renaissance period and it's almost as large as Hogwarts. We got to meet one of the Professors there and go on a short tour of it."

"And?" Ginny asked nervously, which Emma did not understand.

"It was a nice place, but it wasn't Hogwarts. The professor who gave us the tour reminded me of Snape," Harry answered. "Oh, and all the classes are taught in French." He glanced up and Emma caught his gaze in her rear-view mirror before he looked back at Ginny. "Don't worry, we won't go there unless it really gets bad at Hogwarts, at least not for a few years. It'll take us that long to learn French."

Ginny visibly relaxed and smiled.

"We've been learning French and we'll teach you too. It's kind of fun in a strange way," Harry told her.

"Thanks," Ginny said brightly.

Emma suddenly understood why her two children had been so against the French magical school no matter how much Dan and she commended it, or how much they tried to get their two to see how risky Hogwarts appeared. There was a dynamic in play they had not known about, but she continued her ruminations on how they worked together. How had the three become so close? Were there others that would prevent Hermione and Harry from leaving Hogwarts if something else bad happened?

"Mum?" Hermione suddenly called out. "Can we stop at the Clothing Village? I really want to show Ginny something and maybe get matching T-shirts."

Ginny looked very surprised, Emma noted, but Harry seemed to go along with the idea. "We do have a little extra time." She saw her daughter whisper something in Harry's ear that made him smile just before she turned in. She wondered what this was about. She also noticed that Harry was whispering in Ginny's ear and she was looking very intently back at him as Harry nodded at her. Emma was now sure something was afoot.

Hermione grabbed the hands of the other two and pulled them into a clothing store that catered to teenage girls. Emma smiled to herself, wondering how long it would be before Harry was bored silly. To her surprise, Harry not only did not become bored, but he started suggesting clothes for the girls. By the time they left the shopping area, all three had a matching T-shirt and Ginny had a small pile of clothes, which Harry had paid for. Emma was growing concerned at the way Harry was spending money today, even if he did have a lot in his vaults. She and Dan would have to talk to him about money management soon, she thought.

Back in the car, Ginny held the bags of new clothes as if they were precious while the kids started talking about classes.

"Since I didn't see you getting the books for Muggle Studies or Divination, I assume you're not taking those?" Ginny asked.

"No," Hermione answered. "We're both taking Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, and Care of Magical Creatures. I wanted to take the other two as well, but Harry talked me out of them."

"Yeah, she would have killed herself with that many classes, and what does she need Muggle Studies for anyway?" Harry shook his head disbelievingly.

"It would be interesting to see how the Wizarding world sees the Muggle world," Hermione replied in an easy manner.

"But like I said before, you could read a book about that and avoid all the useless homework. You could probably teach the class," Harry praised her, causing her to blush.

"The twins say Divination is pretty useless unless you already have the gift," Ginny said. "I'll probably take Muggle Studies, Care of Magical Creatures, and Ancient Runes when I get to third year."

"We could help you get ahead by studying with us," Hermione offered. "Maybe they would even let you skip a year and join us in class."

Emma wondered why her daughter would suggest that.

"They won't," Ginny replied. "I looked in the handbook for that question at the end of last year and it said they never let people jump grades," she said a little unhappily.

"I wonder if there's another way..." Hermione speculated out loud.

"That would be great if someone found one, but I won't hold my breath waiting for it," Ginny answered.

Emma noticed Harry leaning over and whispering something in Ginny's ear. The girl smiled appreciatively before leaning her head over onto his shoulder. Emma wondered if those two were falling for each other, but they were still so young. Then there was the conversation Harry had with her father this morning. Emma could not help but notice it had been a very serious conversation, whatever it was they were talking about, based on their expressions. And Hermione knew, Emma was sure of that. That made the woman wonder what secrets her children were keeping from her, despite how much they told Dan and herself about their school. Were secrets simply a part of the Wizarding world? Yes, she realized, suddenly remembering that she was not supposed to mention magic to any of her normal friends.

They were soon home and the kids went to put their things up. Ginny would be able to stay in the spare bedroom on her own rather than share, a benefit of their house having four bedrooms. Emma thought the girl was in heaven by the way she acted. It was all very amusing.

Dan was soon home with a number of pizzas. Ginny had never had pizza before and found she loved it. They used the occasion to have a small birthday party for Harry, since his birthday had been yesterday. Both Hermione and Harry had wanted to wait one extra day to have it, until Ginny could come. It was yet one more facet to the mystery that was Ginny Weasley.

After dinner, the kids all sat down on the couch, with Harry in the middle, and watched the newly purchased movie Aladdin.

Emma and Dan watched from the doorway and barely contained themselves as the kids acted out the parts, trying to quote the lines. They were hilarious to watch. Harry tried to be the prince while Hermione was the genie and Ginny was the princess. When the movie ended, Hermione rewound the movie and they watched it again, now doing the quotes with the characters instead of after. The

parents went back into the kitchen and talked.

"Dan, I'm concerned about Harry."

"Oh? What about?" Dan popped a cork from a bottle of wine and started pouring for the two of them.

"He bought everything today, including things for Ginny. He has a heart of gold, but I'm concerned about him not knowing how to budget and control money, even if he does have a lot."

"Perhaps I should talk to him about that soon," Dan offered. "After Ginny leaves would probably be a better time than now."

"I think that would be a good idea. Did you know he has a family vault and he probably has ten times the amount of money in it as he does in his trust vault? It was staggering." Emma was shaking her head ruefully. "He also has properties and investments. Dan, he's going to need help learning how to deal with it all."

"I wonder if they teach that at his school."

"That's a good question. Oh, I found out why he and Hermione were so against the French school and don't seem to want to change schools in general," she said conspiratorially. "It's Ginny. They didn't want to leave her behind. What I don't understand is why they consider her more important than their safety."

"You think Ginny is the reason? That's interesting." Dan thought for a moment. "You know, those three get along very, very well."

Emma took another sip. "Too well if you ask me. If you had asked me yesterday, I would have said that one day, Harry and Hermione would be dating; but I watched them today. Now, I'm not sure if Harry will date Hermione or Ginny. And he talked to Ginny's father about something very serious before they shook hands at the end."

Dan swirled his wine for a moment before taking a sip. "Harry did just turn thirteen." He grinned at his wife. "Since we only had Hermione, I never thought I'd have to give 'The Talk' to anyone."

Emma chuckled. "I should have discussed it with Hermione last summer, but didn't. I guess we need to do that soon."

"How about saving that until after Ginny goes home as well? There's no need to embarrass them too much now, and I don't think anything will happen while there's three of them together," Dan suggested and his wife agreed. "Back to the problem with the school, do you think that they would be more willing to change schools sooner if we could get Arthur and Molly to send Ginny to another school with them?"

"Assuming they all learn French," she reminded him, "but yes, I think getting Ginny to go too would help. However, I don't think that's going to happen," Emma said with disappointment. "I don't see Molly as one to let that happen. The more I've exchanged letters with her, the more I've found she's very opinionated, and rather close-minded. She was nice enough to answer my questions last year, but she didn't seem open to things that weren't traditional for her. All of her children have gone to Hogwarts, and I don't think that will be changing."

"Damn! There's got to be some easier way we can get them away from Hogwarts as soon as possible." He heard his wife agree, but he also heard no other voices. "Listen," he said as he put his nearly empty glass down and walked towards the living room. Only the movie on the telly could be heard.

Looking in, both parents saw the three children passed out on the couch, with Harry in the middle and the two girls leaning on him. His head was lolled on Hermione's.

"That's so cute," Emma whispered with a grin. "I need the camera."

She hurried off and Dan chuckled quietly. Emma took her picture and several more.

They got the kids up one by one and helped each of them to their room and into bed, with Emma taking the girls and Dan taking Harry. When they came back down, Dan smiled at his wife. "You know, those pictures will be good blackmail material in a year or two." Emma laughed.

The next morning, Emma was in the kitchen making some tea and toast before she and Dan left for work. For a moment, she thought she heard female voices, and then she heard a window close. Looking over at the open kitchen window, it was easy to guess what was happening and it brought a small smile to her.

"What has you so happy this morning?" her husband asked as he walked in to get his own cup of tea.

"I thought I heard the girls talking, then I definitely heard a window close." She nodded towards the open kitchen window.

Dan looked that way a moment before he smiled too. "Ah. You know, it's nice to see that happening. I used to wonder if she'd ever do any little girl things like gossip about boys."

"Or about one boy, I strongly suspect," Emma said impishly. "Shall we see what work holds today?"

"If we must," Dan replied with a smile. Setting his tea cup down, he led his wife out the door. A moment later, they were driving into the office.

Hermione woke up a few minutes early. She suspected noises from her parents getting ready for work had awakened her. On her way back from the bathroom, she looked in Ginny's room and saw the girl sitting in the window seat hugging her knees to her.

"Ginny?" she softly called. Ginny's head snapped around to look at her. When Hermione saw the red eyes and tear streaks, she closed the bedroom door behind her and walked over to her friend. "What's wrong?"

Ginny sniffled. "Nothing, other than feeling sorry for myself and being angry about it."

Hermione looked at her friend and made a decision. She leaned forward and closed the window.

"Why did you do that? The morning air was nice."

"It is, but the kitchen window is right under this one, and I suspect we'll be talking about things you don't want my parents to hear," Hermione said as she sat down next to her friend and bond-mate. "What's wrong, Ginny?"

The redhead wiped her cheeks and leaned back against the wall. "Have you fully thought about what this all means for us, the three of us? I mean, have you considered what it will be like in ten years?" When Hermione did not immediately answer, Ginny added, "I've had a lot of time to think this summer, when I wasn't hating my mother."

Hermione put a hand on the other girl's foot and patted it. "It will be all right, Ginny. Your dad stopped the punishment."

"I know, but what about us? In ten years we'll all be out of school and living together, the three of us. That will be unusual, don't you think?"

They heard a heavy door close downstairs followed by a car starting

a moment later, before it left.

"My parents are gone for the day." Hermione looked at her and smiled a little sadly. "Life won't be normal, but we'll deal with it." She brightened. "Besides, I'll have a sister now and I've always wanted a sister."

Ginny laughed and lunged forward, hugging her new sister tightly. "Me, too."

When they parted again, Hermione became more serious. "So why were you so upset when I came in?"

Ginny's face clouded and she played with a strand of hair for a moment. "I was thinking about me and how stupid I am."

"The diary wasn't your fault."

Ginny shook her head. "That wasn't it, although I suppose that does touch it a little. No, I was thinking about what I wanted. Seeing what you have here, the happy home and a good family made me think about how bad the last year has been and how much I wanted to leave my family."

"Your family loves you, Ginny," Hermione insisted.

"Mostly," Ginny agreed after a moment of thought. "My brothers do most of the time and I know my father does." She sighed. "If I have to be honest, I know my mother does sometimes; but I still wanted to get away and I saw Harry as my best way to do that. Then yesterday, I saw all of his money and I enjoyed him buying things for me. It's like I was living my fantasy."

"And?" Hermione asked when Ginny stopped.

"And I was really happy because I realized I had left the ugly part of

my summer behind, which made me think of what Harry told me about his life growing up. He told you about all the chores he had to do and never got any thanks for it?"

Hermione nodded. "It's really sad and it makes me angry that his relatives treated him that way."

"I know, I feel that way too. But that made me realize how selfish I was being. All my thoughts since I joined you were about me, how good it was and what Harry could do for me." A new tear leaked down Ginny's cheek. "Me, me, me. Me, who might not have had a perfect home, had it a lot better than he did. Despite that, he treats me nice and takes care of me. He treats me like part of his family. He treats me better than I deserve."

"He is pretty special," Hermione softly said.

Ginny wiped her face again. "He is and I'm going to be a better person just for him. I'll learn to enjoy it when he's nice to me, but I want to do something nice for him." Ginny grew determined and she leaned forward. "It's no longer going to be all about me; it's going to be about him, and you too. I don't think he really knows what love is. I think you and your parents have helped, but deep down, I think he's still living in his cupboard under the stairs. I want to pull him out of there, Hermione. I want him to love life with us."

Moved by her friend's plan and plea, Hermione grabbed Ginny in a hug. They held each other tightly for a moment.

"We can each show him love. I also want us to be best friends and show him friendship. Will you show him friendship with me?" Ginny asked.

"Of course, Ginny. We can both show him love and friendship. I think he needs all he can get."

They both giggled as they thought of what Harry might think about what they were going to do.

"Go wash your face with cold water and then let's get dressed," Hermione advised.

Ginny gave her one more hug before scampering off to the bathroom in the hall.

Hermione went to her room with a smile on her face. She had wondered about the young girl and was pleased to see that she was starting to see this more maturely.

Downstairs, Harry had finished his cereal and was looking at the Daily Prophet. He heard feet running downstairs and looked up in time to see Ginny come running to him. She almost knocked him off his chair as she leaned over and gave him a hug.

"Err, what was that for?" He was confused. Looking past Ginny, he could see Hermione and she was smiling very widely at them.

"Well, I don't think I said thank you enough yesterday," Ginny started to explain.

"You did," he assured her.

"Then it's because you looked like you needed one." Ginny blushed a little, but she did not break eye contact. "Anytime you feel lonely or need a hug for any reason, know that I have a hug for you. All right?"

"Uh, OK," Harry slowly replied, not sure what to make of that.

Ginny became more serious. "Harry, were you the one that caused Lucius Malfoy's house to be searched and him to be sent to Azkaban?"

Harry grabbed her hand. "I will protect you and Hermione. You are my family."

Ginny engulfed him in another hug, pressing his face to her chest this time since she was standing and he was sitting. "Thank you, Harry! I won't forget that and I'll do something very special for you one day."

"You don't have to," he said a little muffled, bringing a smile and light blush to her face as she realised how she was hugging him.

She released him so she could look at him properly and saw he was blushing slightly too. "Maybe I don't have to, but I want to because it's what family does, Harry." Because she knew it was what the older kids did, Ginny took hold of his face with both hands and slowly leaned down. When he did not back away, she closed the last few inches and brushed her lips on his. They felt ... soft and warm. "Thank you," she murmured.

As she pulled back, she said, "We may be bonded, but I don't think we're ready for all the things that go with it. When you're ready to really kiss, I'm sure I'll be ready too, as will Hermione."

Harry watched a very satisfied looking Ginny walk over and get her own bowl of cereal. He looked over and saw Hermione with a calculating look, as if she wondered what it would be like to kiss him. That made him feel warm all over again for some reason.

"I, uh, I think I'll go get my books. We can, uh, we can start on looking at things for next year and work on our French. Maybe even help Ginny catch up to us. Yeah, we should help Ginny catch up to us." Not sure he could take them looking at him like that, he quickly left to go to his room for a few minutes and cool off. He would almost swear he heard giggles behind him, but he tried to ignore all the sounds.

That evening, after a day where the girls had mysteriously started to sit a little closer to him than usual, Harry retrieved the copy of his parents' Last Will. He had some alone time as the girls were busy with Emma.

He read through it. Other than the first couple of paragraphs, it was not all that hard to understand and was only two pages in length. In fact, about half of it seemed to be what they thought about people and suggestions for him to do. It was page two that was so interesting, and maddening.

Deciding he needed help to make sure he was really understanding what he was reading, he took the Will to Dan. He had a warm feeling about doing something with his "father".

"Dad, can you help me with this? I want to make sure I really understand what I'm reading." Harry handed the document over.

"Ah," Dan said after a moment. "Emma told me you copied some of the documents in your family vault." He smiled at Harry. "It must be nice to be able to make copies without a photocopier."

Harry grinned. "It is."

"Well, let's see what you have here." Dan started reading. "Hmm, this first part looks like a fancy way to say that if only one of them died, then the other inherited it all and legally had control over everything. Emma and I have similar language in ours."

"Oh, OK. That first part was the hardest."

"Yes," Dan drawled, "legalese at its finest. This next section is more personal."

"It's not the same as hearing your parents say they love you, but it was nice to read."

Dan smiled at him and clapped him on the shoulder. "Emma and I love you, too. It may not be in quite the same way as your parents would if they were here, but please don't doubt that we do love you very much."

"Thanks," Harry said shyly and looked down in embarrassment.

"There's nothing wrong with sharing emotions, Harry. I know most boys your age don't, and I didn't very much at your age, but there's nothing wrong with it. Everyone has feelings."

He turned back to the document to continue reading. Harry was sure he was still red in the face, but he looked at Dan in appreciation. This is what he thought of when he thought about spending time with his father -- doing things together, even if they were simple things.

"This next section," Dan said, breaking Harry out of his thoughts, "lists the bequests. Do you know if this has been executed or not?"

"Uh, executed?"

"Has it been done or carried out?" Dan said with a smile.

"Well, the family vault has a lot of papers in it, which Hermione said were the investments. So I guess all of that stuff has been given to me, but I really don't know about any of it."

"Hmm, we'll probably need to contact the barristers who drew this up, or perhaps the bank, but there's no hurry. Other than a few gifts, it all goes to you anyway." Dan kept on reading. "This last part could be very interesting."

"Yeah, other than the first few paragraphs, that is what confused me the most," Harry told him.

Dan slowly read through it, mumbling as he went. "All right, let's see if this makes sense. You're parents left a list of five people or couples to leave you with if both of them died at the same time. The first is Sirius Black. Do you know who he is?"

"Uh, sort of. My parents also left me a letter in the vault and my dad said he was their best friend. That's all I know," Harry said a little apologetically.

Dan looked thoughtful. "I wonder why he didn't come to pick you up to take care of you. Perhaps something happened to him too. It seems unusual to me to list five people, but as you and Hermione have explained, they were in a war. The second was Frank and Alice Longbottom."

"They're the parents of one of my dorm-mates, Neville Longbottom. It's..." Harry paused, trying to figure out how to explain. "It's strange. He says he was raised by his Gran, and yet ... he talks about his parents as if they aren't dead." He looked at Dan quizzically, wondering whether he was making sense.

"I don't know. Harry. That could be his way of dealing with their death, or maybe they live somewhere else because they can't take care of him." When Harry nodded, he turned back to the Will. "Third choice was a Filius Flitwick. Where have I heard that name before?"

Harry grinned. "Professor Flitwick is our Charms teacher. It would have been great to have been raised by him. Not only is he a lot of fun, but he's very smart."

Dan smiled with him. "I'm sorry that didn't work out for you." He continued to the next name. "Ah, this one I know: Minerva McGonagall."

"She wouldn't have been as good as Flitwick, but I think she would have done all right." Harry sighed. "Two good choices and I got

neither."

"Well, what I'd like to know is what happened. The fifth entry is Albus Dumbledore. There were four other names before his and he didn't even raise you. He gave you away. What's worse," Dan said, getting a little angry, "is that it finally says that if all the choices are not able to take you, that you are to be raised by the professors at Hogwarts and raised in the castle."

"I've always thought of Hogwarts as home, at least until you let me live here," he hastily added the last part. "Instead, I get sent to the Dursleys."

"It doesn't say not to send you there, but it lists enough choices that you shouldn't have gone there." Dan looked at Harry carefully, trying to gauge Harry's feelings. "Harry, would you like Emma and I to try to find out why you went there?"

Harry thought about it for a moment. "No, or at least not yet. I'm not as angry about it as I used to be, when I had to live with my relatives. Now I think I want to know because I feel like I'm missing something I need to know about, not because I want it changed."

Dan patted him on the back. "You work it out in your own way then, but if you need or want help, know that Emma and I are always here to help you."

Harry gave him a huge grin. "Thanks, Dad."

"You should put that document somewhere safe so it doesn't get lost. The girls will be home soon from the grocers and you can show it to them later. They may have a useful idea or two."

"Good idea."

"And Harry, I think that we should sit down and talk about a few

things next week after Ginny goes home when we won't be interrupted..."

"What about?" Harry quickly asked.

"Financial planning would be a good topic. Emma told me that you have investments as well as gold in your vault, and you're going to need to know how to take care of that. We can start helping you to understand the language and principles that go with that, so it will be easier for you when you have to take care of it one day," Dan explained.

"Oh, right. That sounds like a good idea." Still smiling, Harry ran upstairs and put the document in his trunk with the letter from his parents. He was slowly filling in the gaps about his family.

Dan felt pleased that Harry still came to him to ask questions, after their disagreement at the beginning of the summer about continuing at Hogwarts. He also decided it was best not to mention "The Talk" until he was giving it. Advanced notice could be a problem, and he should probably talk to Harry at the same time Emma was talking to Hermione.

The day Ginny was to go home, Hermione opened the Daily Prophet to see a massive story, with a photo, about the escape of Sirius Black from Azkaban. She was very thoughtful as she finished reading the story and sat thinking about it.

Harry came down a few minutes later.

"You need to read this," she said firmly as she pushed the newspaper to him.

Ginny came down while Harry was still reading.

Emma Granger also brought a full breakfast in and frowned a little at the intense expression on Harry's face. "Harry? Is something wrong?"

"Yes and no." He looked at Ginny. "I've never read any of the accounts about what happened when I was a baby, but does the common story mention anything about Sirius Black?"

"Yes, it's part of what makes the story so tragic. He betrayed his best friends," Ginny explained.

"Harry?"

He looked up to his step-mum, or that's how he thought of her now. "It looks like there's more to my family history than I knew. The best friend of my parents betrayed them, which is why they were killed, and then he killed another best friend and some people who were nearby. He was sent to prison the next day, which explains why he didn't raise me like my parents' Will stated. Apparently, he just broke out and is on the loose." At her look of concern, he hastily added, "But I wouldn't be concerned, we have good protective wards here."

Emma nodded in understanding.

"You read your parents' Will?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah. You can read it later. I meant to show it to you, but you were out with Emma and then I forgot."

Hermione smiled in appreciation.

Harry looked at each of his bond-mates. "I believe we have a new project for the coming year. I'd like to learn a lot more about my family."

Hermione brightened at the prospect of a project. "I've never done a genealogy project before, but it sounds like fun."

"I agree," Harry said with amusement. She was so predictable sometimes.

"That does explain why you weren't sent to live with him," Hermione said.

"Yeah," he said a little sadly, wishing it could have been otherwise.

"Harry?" Ginny got his attention. "Before you return to school, you and Hermione should visit your family vault again. You can copy what's on the family tapestry to learn some of the names and dates."

"That's brilliant, Ginny," Hermione said excitedly. "I wonder if there's more family information in some of those papers I copied. I haven't had a chance to read them all yet."

Ginny sat up a little straighter at the praise from her "sister".

"As much fun as this is, you need to hurry and finish eating. We have to go meet Ginny's father so she can go home," Emma reminded them as she left the room.

Ginny deflated a little and the other two gave her sympathetic looks. She was the happiest she had been all summer, being with her Harry and her "sister". The three of them had grown a lot closer. All of her new purchases were shrunk in her bag and she knew she could cancel the shrinking charm once she was alone in her room. Ginny was looking forward to their arrival at The Burrow in a couple of weeks, and then all three of them would be returning to school so they could be together every day.

((A/N: A little character development here. Next time, Harry starts to learn about his family history and he will be surprised.))

Chapter 10 -- Interviews, Part 1

Harry and Hermione gave their parents a hug good-bye while in the Leaky Cauldron. Percy stood there waiting calmly, having been sent by his mother to retrieve them. They seemed decent enough and Harry had saved his sister, for which he had been very grateful. He eyed the two, noting how they interacted with each other, comparing them to his memories of them from last year. He also thought about how much Ginevra was looking forward to them coming, much more so than Ron. He thought Harry might be a good match for Ginevra, if Hermione did not interfere. Ginevra would need someone strong to help her in a few years, of that he had no doubt.

His path was already planned and had been so for the last few years. He was Head Boy this year and had no doubt it would go well. That would help him next year, when he would seek a good job at the Ministry so he would be able to live on his own. He truly detested the thought of having to hurt his father's feelings, but there would be little choice if everything kept on its present course. He was not particularly concerned about his mother's feelings by this point.

Percy bade the senior Grangers good-bye and made sure his two charges enunciated "The Burrow" correctly before he followed. Arriving home, he landed in a sea of chaos, nothing unusual for his family. He was privately amused to see Ginevra hugging Harry as if he had been lost for a long time, when she had visited him a mere two weeks prior. Perhaps the young man would be his sister's way out of the family mess; he would guess she was trying to make it so. His duty done, Percy headed up to his room to continue ploughing through his pile of policy manuals. His goal was to get an interview at the Ministry by Christmas time, and he wanted to know all of their procedures by heart before the interview.

"Merlin, Ginny, let him go, will ya?" Ron complained as his sister was

hugging Harry as if he was about to die. Ron shook his head, noticing that Hermione seemed to find the scene funny while his brother Percy just strode from the room, ignoring them as normal -- the prat.

Ginny finally let go of Harry and moved to Hermione, allowing Harry and Ron to slap each other's shoulders in greeting.

"Doing OK there, mate?"

"Yeah, Ron, doing good. You?"

"Great summer so far. Want to go flying? I'm sure the girls will want to talk," Ron said as he practically dragged Harry away.

Molly Weasley took that moment to step into the room. She had a smile on her face, but it looked forced. "Hello Harry, hello Hermione. Welcome back. If you'll take your trunks up, that would be helpful. Harry, you're with Ron like last time. And Hermione, you're again with Ginny."

"Yes, ma'am," Hermione and Harry said together as they grabbed their trunks. Ron helped Harry and Ginny helped Hermione.

When they came back down, Molly Weasley was waiting for them. "Harry, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions, if I may?"

The forced calm and knowing what the woman put Ginny through made Harry very cautious and put him on edge. "Yes, ma'am."

She gave a small genuine smile at his politeness. "I understand that you bought a number of things for Ginny when she went to see you. I'd like to know why."

Ginny had prompted him in a letter to be ready for this. Her mother had not been pleased when she had found the new clothes Harry

had bought her.

"As I told your husband, Ginny is one of my best friends and I wanted to make her happy. They were gifts and I have no expectations for any kind of repayment," he told her seriously, not breaking eye contact.

"But you spent a lot of money on her. We can buy her those things, especially since Arthur won the Galleon Draw this summer and we haven't spent it on anything else."

"A lot of money is relative, Mrs Weasley. By my count, I spent very little on her, and yet it was very enjoyable to see her so happy. I have more money than I'll ever use -- two vaults worth, not that it matters to me -- so what's a few Galleons to make a friend happy?" Harry stated with a shrug.

"You have two vaults!" Ron shouted, his eyes going wide.

Harry stayed calm, despite his friend's outburst. "I do, but like I said, it doesn't matter to me; it's only money. There are more important things in life."

"But you need that to live on," Molly objected. "You should not be giving that to us for things her father and I should provide."

Harry sighed. He had been afraid this was going to happen when he came over, but he stood up for himself in front of the irate looking woman and his friend who did not look so happy. "Mrs Weasley, I've already discussed this with your husband and he and I have an understanding. If you're still unhappy after my explanation, I would suggest that he may be able to help you understand better than me."

She glared at him and then turned and stalked off to the kitchen.

"Are you going to be like Malfoy now that you know you have a lot of

money?" Ron asked a little belligerently.

"Why would I change?" Harry asked, wondering about his friend, even as he remembered Mr Weasley's comment about Ron and gifts. When Ron said nothing and stared, as if needing to think very hard, Harry turned and walked out into the back garden. The two girls followed him.

"I'm sorry, Harry, about Mum and Ron," Ginny said softly. "I swear, Ron was acting like Malfoy himself."

He smiled and put an arm around her shoulders, giving her a quick one-armed hug before dropping his arm. "It's not your fault and your father did warn me." He shrugged. "I'll let him take care of it."

"Ron's not going to be happy or friendly with you for a while," she told him.

"That's too bad, but I care about you more. Are you happy with me, Ginny?"

Ginny grinned hugely. "Always, Harry." She grabbed Harry and Hermione's hand. "Come on, let's go sit on the bench swing and catch up."

"You mean like how your family got its picture in the paper?" Harry asked with a grin.

Ginny smiled brightly. "That was fun. Ron even enjoyed, although his pet rat barely behaved itself so we almost didn't get the picture taken." The other two chuckled and the trio enjoyed the day together.

Ron was cool toward Harry through most of the week, and Harry gave him space. By the time September arrived, Ron was back to normal. Harry was not sure what to think about that and was a little wary of Ron and his motives.

Harry was happy that Mrs Weasley had treated them nicely after their initial argument, but she did that mostly by leaving them alone.

The Weasleys and their guests arrived on Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ with fifteen minutes to spare, which according to Ginny was really early. Before they could board the train, Arthur pulled Harry aside.

"Harry, if we could talk for a few moments, there's something I think you should know."

"Of course, Mr Weasley."

"My wife and a number of other people have not wanted to tell you this, but I think you have a right to know." He paused for a moment as if gathering his courage. "A few weeks ago, a criminal named Sirius Black escaped from Azkaban."

"Yes, sir, I know."

"You know? How?" Arthur looked upset.

"We read about it in the Daily Prophet when it first came out. I think it was the last day Ginny was at our house," Harry explained.

Mr Weasley blinked slowly for a moment, as if unable to believe that there was such a simple answer that he had missed. "Right, well ... now that he's escaped, he'll probably try to come after you. Please promise me that you'll stay in school and stay safe," Arthur said caringly.

"Of course, Mr Weasley. I'll do my best to stay safe, as well as keep Ginny and Hermione safe."

Arthur clapped him on the shoulder. "Good lad! Take care of yourself this year. Best you get on the train, now."

"Thanks for the warning, Mr Weasley." Harry hurried to get on the train, climbing on board just before the last whistle sounded. He quickly found his friends, including Neville. He shrunk his trunk down to half its normal size and put it under his seat.

"What did Dad want?" Ginny asked from his right. Hermione was on his left, as usual.

"He told me that Sirius Black had escaped from Azkaban and that he might be after me. He wanted me to be aware, and to stay safe. I appreciate what he did, really."

Hermione smiled for a moment. "I guess Mr and Mrs Weasley were trying not to say anything so as not to upset you."

"Yeah." Harry sat that for a moment and no one said anything. "I wish I knew more about what happened, though. Why would he turn like that against my parents?"

"The Blacks were known to be an Dark family," Neville said. "They actively supported You-Know-Who. I heard his younger brother was a Death Eater, too."

Harry shrugged. "I'd like to know what made him change." He looked at his two friends across from him; he had not told Ron about what was in his vault after his friend got all jealous a week ago. "My father left me a letter which I just found this summer."

Neville looked really envious for a quick moment, but the look was gone so quickly, Harry was not sure he had seen it.

"In the letter, my father spoke like Sirius was his best friend. He was supposed to raise me if something happened to my parents." He paused, thinking carefully. "I think Hagrid said something about him in passing once, but I don't remember what was said. Maybe I should

ask him."

"We really need to research your family some more," Hermione said adamantly. "We have a number of little facts and they don't completely add up. When I told you about your father playing Quidditch in your first year, I'd only looked for about five or ten minutes, so there has to be loads more information if we dig deeper."

"Thanks, Hermione." He gave her a big grin and she blushed a little, but she held his gaze. "We also have the information on some of my ancestors from that family tree; we should look them up too." Hermione agreed.

The five students talked and played Exploding Snap for a while. Harry was getting up to go find the loo when the door opened. It was time for their regular "taunt on the train".

"Well, Potter," Draco Malfoy drawled. "I see you got another weasel to start following you this year."

Harry saw Ron shift angrily out of the corner of his eye. "And I see that I have friends who like me, not someone I had to pay to follow me around like you do, Malfoy."

Malfoy coloured a little in anger. As he opened his mouth to retort, Harry reached over and grabbed the door handle and slammed the door shut. Malfoy had been so intent on his insult, he had not paid attention to where his hand was, which was now crushed between the door and the doorframe. The Slytherin howled and jerked his hand out, so Harry pushed the door the rest of the way shut.

"I guess I'll wait a few minutes to find the loo," Harry said smugly.

"Way to go, mate!" Ron crowed. Neville looked pretty happy too.

"Harry..." Hermione said disappointedly.

"What? Someone left the door open so I closed it," he explained as if it should have been obvious.

Ginny broke the silence by giggling. Ron and Neville roared with laughter. Even Hermione could not keep a smile off her face.

"Did you see the picture of Malfoy's house in the paper this summer?" Neville asked with a wide grin.

"And what happened to his father? He deserved that." Ginny added with a big smile. They all smiled for a moment.

Harry was about to try to find the loo again when the train jerked and started to slow down. The Hogsmeade station was not in sight and no one seemed to know what was going on.

When the train came to a halt, the air started to grow unnaturally cold and then the lights on the train went out. Since it was now after sunset, the train became very dark indeed.

"What's happening?" someone asked; it sounded like Neville.

A couple of screams came from somewhere up the corridor just as their door opened. There was the sound of a rattling breath and the cold intensified. Harry was also startled to hear a voice in his head, a woman's voice screaming, "Not Harry!"

As two warm weights fell against him, Harry knew he had to do something for his bond-mates. Pulling his wand as the rattling sound grew closer, Harry reached down inside himself and pulled up all the magic he could along with the love of his family and shouted out the only fire spell he knew to try and counteract the cold. A huge Bluebell Flame sprouted in the doorway, lighting up the whole compartment. An eerie shriek came from the creature standing there, which was now on fire, or maybe it was just its robes. Whichever it might be, the

flaming creature backed away from the students and then fled down the hallway.

Harry felt woozy and thought he saw the silvery outline of a ghostly wolf looking into his compartment for a second before it took off after the creature. However, Harry was not sure as he chose that moment to pass out.

Harry felt his cheek being lightly slapped and his name being called, helping him to come to. He also felt the clickity-clack of the train through the floor under his back. Opening his eyes slowly, he saw a lot of brown and red hair, surrounding two very pale faces hovering above him.

"Harry," Hermione called again, sounding very worried.

"What happened?" he asked groggily.

"Something called a Dementor came into our compartment," Ginny said as she shoved something at his mouth. "Here, Professor Lupin said to eat this."

He sniffed and smelled chocolate. He hesitantly opened his mouth and Ginny shoved a big piece in, almost causing him to choke. With some effort, he managed to eat it and immediately started to feel better. As Harry made the effort to sit up, the two girls helped him up off the floor and back on the bench. "So the ... Dementor is why I heard someone screaming 'Not Harry'?"

"Yes, they force you to relive your worst memories. Ginny and I each went back to our first year here," Hermione said, sounding a little vague.

Harry nodded, trying to think things through, although his thinking

was still a little fuzzy. To be honest, he could not place where his "bad memory" came from. "Wait, you said ... Professor Lupin? Who's that, and is he any relation to the Remus Lupin we saw mentioned in my parents' Will?"

"He's our new Defence teacher for this year, and yes," Hermione said more like her normal confident self, "he's the same person."

"Well, that will make tracking him down easier," Harry said. "Where's Ron and Neville? Are they all right?"

"They're fine," Ginny replied. "I sent them to another compartment to give you a chance to wake up without anyone else watching."

"Thanks," he told her with an appreciative grin, which she matched.

The train started to slow down and the lights of a village were easily visible through the window. They were at Hogsmeade.

The three got off the train and were thankful that Malfoy was otherwise occupied. Harry did not feel up to verbally sparring with the boy any more this evening.

At the Sorting Ceremony, Harry got his first good look at Professor Lupin. The man looked older than Harry expected, but he seemed to have a kind face. Harry made up his mind to talk to the man as soon as he could, and he had a few pointed questions to be answered.

After the Feast, Professor McGonagall approached them and motioned him to the side of the Great Hall for a hint of privacy; Hermione and Ginny came too. "Mr Potter, I'm sure the Ministry would apologize to you for a Dementor coming near you, or at least they should if they were here. I wanted you to know that the Headmaster tried very hard to keep them away, but Minister Fudge insisted they come and guard the school."

"I understand, Professor."

"Also ... it was reported that you set one of the Dementors on fire. I was told that it survived and you were reacting in self-defence, so you have nothing to worry about in that regard. However, could you please explain to me what happened?"

"Certainly. The train stopped and all the lights went out. It also got very cold. Our door opened and the cold increased. There was something in the doorway that made us all feel very bad -- very frightened. I did the only spell I could think of to warm the area up, a Bluebell Flame spell that Hermione taught me last year."

Hermione blushed slightly.

"I was really scared, so I put as much power into it as I could. If I did too much, I apologize."

"Nonsense," McGonagall said, waving the apology away. "You were being attacked by a foul creature and defended yourself and those around you, as any brave Gryffindor should. Thank you for the explanation, I shall relay it to the Headmaster. Have a good evening." She did not have the heart to tell him that they were not sure if the Dementor he set on fire would survive beyond tonight. The "shepherding" Aurors were very interested in what had damaged the creature so badly.

The trio went to the Gryffindor common room. It felt good to be back. Harry noticed that Hermione went to a table and not one of the couches. He and Ginny followed her.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

Hermione pulled out some paper and a pen. "Writing to our parents. They need to know what happened."

Harry opened his mouth to ask what, then closed it again when he quickly figured it out. "They won't be pleased, will they?"

"Considering what happened and that the Dementors are also surrounding the school? No."

"You are going to mention that a teacher was on the train and we were never in any danger, right? I mean, there's no need to get them up in arms over this," he suggested.

Hermione paused just long enough to give him a "Duh!" look before she continued writing. She was a little saddened at having to hide things from her parents, but this was relatively small in the whole scheme of things.

Ginny looked at Harry. "Have you ever realized that Hermione can write a letter and talk about something different at the same time?"

A grin came over his face. "No, I don't think I have."

"I find it impressive," Ginny said with a grin of her own.

Hermione paused and looked up at them with a wry smile. "Thanks. I do have to slow my writing down a bit, but it's not that hard once you get used to doing two things at once." She resumed her letter and finished it a minute later. "There, if I hurry, I can mail it tonight and get back before curfew."

"I'll come with you," Harry offered.

"Me too," Ginny said, rising with the others.

"Hey, Harry. Want to play some chess?" Ron asked from several tables over.

"Thanks, but we have to go mail a letter. Tomorrow night would

probably be better. I'll see you in the morning if you're not still up when I get back." Harry gave him a quick wave as the three left.

Ron watched the three leave and wondered what was going on with them. It was not hard to notice they spent a lot of time together. Ron could not figure out why Harry would want to spend that much time with Ginny or Hermione -- they were girls. With nothing fun to do, he got up and went to bed.

The next morning, the students went to breakfast and got their timetables. Harry looked over his and saw that he had Defence tomorrow afternoon. He would try to wait until then to talk to Lupin. He noticed that he had History of Magic first this morning. In a way he was glad about that. He had already read half the book and so he could use that class period to plan his family search.

By the time Binns dismissed the class, Harry's special notebook had a list of all the people he felt he needed to talk to, what order would be best, and some of the questions that he thought were important. He also had set aside some pages to list what he found out. Hermione had been happy to see him so organized. He found her reaction amusing.

After his last class of the day, he and Hermione went back up to their common room and found Ginny waiting for them. Harry dropped his things off, except for his special notebook, and the three walked out to see Hagrid. They did not have Care of Magical Creatures for another two days, and they hadn't seen him for ages.

"Hagrid!" Harry greeted the large man brightly when he opened the door.

"Ello you three, come on in." he closed the door behind them. "Make yourself at 'ome. Tea?" Without waiting for an answer, he pulled out small cups for them, which still looked like large tankards in their hands.

"Yes, please," Hermione said a little timidly as she ducked, his hand going over her head when he reached for a towel.

"So who's your new friend, 'Arry? She looks like a Weasley with the 'air and freckles, although I think I saw 'er around last year."

Ginny giggled. "I'm Ginny Weasley, the last one."

"But the best?" Hagrid asked good-naturedly.

"Of course." The three students laughed at Ginny's reply.

"Congratulations on becoming a professor, Hagrid," Harry said.

"Oh, thanks! Will I see you in my classes?"

"Hermione and I will be. Ginny won't be until next year."

"Ah, good. I've got a load of great creatures lined up for you. I can't tell you now as I don't want to ruin the surprise," Hagrid said with a wink.

"That's OK, we'll trust you," Harry told him. "Hagrid, can I ask you a few questions about my family?"

"Your family? Oh sure, you 'ad some great parents, you did." Hagrid nodded as he talked.

"In the book of photos you gave me, there wasn't a date, but did they get married right after school?"

"Let's see, yes, I think the summer immediately after. You didn't come along until almost two years later, though. They were really 'appy to 'ave you, 'Arry." Hagrid said a little nostalgically.

"Hagrid, when they had to go into hiding, did you know where they hid?" Harry asked carefully, hoping the big man would continue talking.

"Yes, I brought them supplies a few times. They tried not to get out too much, mind you. It wasn't safe for them or you." Hagrid sounded a little sad now.

"When you came to bring me my letter, you told me that you came and pulled me out of the house. Will you please tell me what happened that night?"

"It's a sad night, 'Arry. There are better things to talk about."

Harry was afraid this might happen. He had to try again. "Please, Hagrid. I really need to know."

Hagrid took a long drink of his tea. "I suppose you're getting old enough." The gentle giant spent the next ten minutes describing that night: pulling his family out, Sirius Black stopping by, and how he took care of Harry for a day before taking him to the Dursleys.

Slightly behind Harry, Hermione had her small notebook and pen out and was writing madly, trying to get every word.

"So, Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore were there too?" Harry asked.

"Yes. It was so sad to leave you there. They were sad, too, but Dumbledore said it was for the best. Good man, Dumbledore." Hagrid grabbed the teapot and refilled his cup. "More?" he asked.

"Uh, no thanks. We really have to be at dinner soon," Harry told him. "Thanks for talking to me."

"Oh, anytime 'Arry, anytime." Hagrid told them as they got up.

"What do you think, Harry?" Ginny asked as they walked back to the castle.

"I think I want to talk to McGonagall. The more I hear of the story, the more I think something's wrong."

"I have to agree," Hermione said.

"Why?" Ginny asked.

"Even though I've never met him, from what those who knew him say, Black doesn't sound like a traitor. He sounds like my father's best friend," Harry explained.

"But the stories say he was a traitor," Ginny insisted.

"Stories by whom?" Harry asked and then answered without waiting. "By people who never really knew him. It's just like how people who don't know me assume things about me and then spread untrue stories. Even Hagrid said he had trouble believing Black would do that."

"But he did believe it," Ginny stated.

"No, he didn't fight it," Hermione said. "It's a small but very important difference. I think Hagrid would say something different if he really knew, but he doesn't, so he just goes along with the popular story."

"You make it sound like you think Black is innocent." Ginny sounded a little confused now.

"I honestly don't know yet," Hermione said. "However, I can say that I'm like Harry. I'm questioning the common story. There are some things about it that don't add up, especially as we talk to people."

Ginny nodded. "I'll try to keep an open mind too, but it's considered common knowledge that he is a bad person."

"Just like I'm bad because I'm a Parselmouth," Harry said quietly.

"Truth and common knowledge are not always the same," Hermione said succinctly before they entered the Great Hall for dinner.

Ginny looked down and nodded, understanding what both of them were trying to tell her.

As they had dinner, Ginny continued to think about what they said and she became more troubled the more she thought about it. She and Hermione always sat on either side of Harry, so she leaned forward a little to speak past him. "Hermione, if truth and common knowledge are not always the same, then how many things do we normally believe to be true really aren't? I mean, we have plenty of examples that things we read in books aren't true."

Hermione started to object.

"No, wait, let me finish," Ginny asked and Hermione stayed silent. Several others around them were starting to listen in. "At least in the history books, there are plenty of examples of errors. The stuff they write about Harry is mostly made up and you've told me before that the winners in a battle write the history, so we only see their side. Books get updated as we learn new things about magic, so if we're looking at an older book, that might be wrong as well. And I think we all know that the Daily Prophet doesn't always print the truth. In fact, it doesn't even always print common knowledge, but what only a few people want us to know. I've heard Dad say that."

There were several nodding heads on the last part.

Hermione sighed. "You do have a point, Ginny. For current events and history, we should also look at the credibility of the author. While

that is true for reference works as well, it should not be as big a problem there." She shook her head a little. "You've brought up the classic problem of 'What is truth?' I think it's hard to find the absolute answer, and magic just makes the situation worse."

Harry chuckled. "I hadn't thought about that, but you're right. Before I came here, I would have told you that you were loony if you said that you could make things float or people could fly around on a broom." Others chuckled too, especially those not from Wizarding families.

"So what do we do?" Ginny asked.

"We check our facts carefully, cross-referencing and verifying as much as possible. Two or more sources for a fact are far more certain to be closer to the truth than a single source, unless there is other special corroborating evidence," Hermione explained.

Ginny stared blankly for a moment as she thought that through. On the third try, the explanation started to make sense. "OK, thanks." She thought about that some more as an idea started to shift around in her head.

By the time they returned to the Gryffindor Tower, Ginny liked her idea even more. "I'll be back in a few minutes," she told her bond-mates and ran upstairs to her room.

She wrote a short letter before searching for a short self-inking quill and some extra parchment. She put all of that in the envelope and sealed it, hoping this worked.

Back downstairs, she walked over to Harry and Hermione, who had started to work on homework. "I'm going to go mail a letter before I start my homework. Can I borrow Hedwig, Harry?" she asked with a self-satisfied look.

"Uh, sure Ginny, anytime, you know that."

"Thanks!" she said brightly and hurried off. She really hoped this worked.

"What do you suppose that was about?" Harry asked Hermione.

"I have no idea, but I'm sure we'll find out. She may be a little sneaky at times, but she always tells us eventually."

Harry nodded and returned to his Transfiguration essay. He wanted to finish soon so he could return to working on his family project.

The next morning, Albus Dumbledore opened his Daily Prophet at the breakfast table in the Great Hall. After reading the headline, "Hogwarts Students Attacked by Dementors!", he sighed deeply.

"That has all the signs of Emma Granger," Minerva McGonagall said quietly. She had read the front page of her copy a few minutes earlier. Other than being sensationalized, all the facts, as she knew them, were present. "The article raises a few good questions. What if the Dementors get out of control and come on the school grounds? Half of the staff and all of the students couldn't protect themselves."

"I raised that very question with the Minister," Dumbledore said solemnly. "I did not find his blithe assurances of that not happening to be very comforting. As always, we shall have to do our best with what we have."

McGonagall looked out over the students, many of them looking at the sensational story. The "two Grangers" and their friends were definitely discussing it based on how animated their gestures were and how they kept pointing at the newspaper.

"Do you believe the article will cause the Ministry to change its mind?" she asked.

"One could hope that would be the case, but alas, I believe that particular hope to be in vain," he said sadly.

"And if one of the students gets kissed by those foul creatures, there will be hell to pay," she said firmly.

"We must see to it that does not happen. Unfortunately, the one most likely to draw them in is the one we can least afford to lose," he casually commented.

As what he said suddenly became clear, McGonagall froze as she was about to eat the last of her breakfast. "What about Potter would draw them in?" She looked at him intently, trying to get any hint from his expression, but Dumbledore gave nothing away.

"I believe that what happened on the train, in that his was the only compartment they entered, is a good indication that they are attracted to him." Dumbledore patted his mouth with his napkin. "If you'll excuse me, I've put off some correspondence for far too long."

She nodded and watched him leave, realizing his statement was only a partial answer. McGonagall looked back over at her house's table and watched young Potter, wondering. It did not take Merlin to realize that there was something special about him. Dumbledore's actions made that very clear.

Harry followed his class schedule for the second day of class. Today took him to his Defence Against the Dark Arts class and into the presence of a friend of his parents.

He found it very interesting, as did Hermione based on the glances she gave him, that Professor Lupin did not acknowledge Harry in any way, not even by sending any extra looks his way.

As they were walking to Charms, Harry looked at his friend. "Did you notice that he didn't say anything to me? I understand about during class, that makes sense, but he didn't even try to talk to me after class or ask me to come by and see him tomorrow," he said a little sadly.

"Maybe he'll come and find you tomorrow instead. He might not have wanted to look like he was playing favourites by talking about your family," Hermione suggested.

"Maybe," he politely agreed. "I don't know, it seemed like there was a wall between us." He deeply sighed. "That's all right for now. I was going to try to talk to McGonagall tonight anyway."

"I hope she's in her quarters, I'd like to see what they look like. You can tell so much about a person by how they decorate their room," Hermione said a little authoritatively.

Harry grinned. "You mean like how you like books because your room has two bookcases that are filled beyond normal capacity?"

She swatted him on the shoulder, although she was smiling shyly.

Harry chuckled as they walked into class. By the time Charms class was over, he decided to add Flitwick to his list of people to interview.

After dinner, Harry and his bond-mates went outside to take a short walk in the evening sun. Early September were a little cool, but still a nice time of year.

"So, Professor McGonagall tonight and then Professor Lupin tomorrow, right?" Hermione asked, wanting to have a schedule -- as usual.

"Since tomorrow is Saturday, I thought we'd visit Professor Flitwick as well," Harry told her.

"When are you going to talk to Dumbledore?" Ginny asked.

Harry noisily let his breath out. "I don't know. Maybe Sunday afternoon would be good. I'm..." he paused for a moment. "Part of me wants to know as much as possible as soon as possible, but part of me is afraid of what I'll find out."

"It'll be OK, Harry. We'll be here with you," Ginny said as she put her hand on his back and lightly rubbed in circles.

Harry smiled at her shyly and she returned the smile happily. He found it interesting that she did not blush around him much anymore, at least for most things. He could still get her to blush with a big compliment, but that was true of himself as well, as the girls liked to demonstrate often.

Looking at each of the two girls, Harry had the strange thought that he was just like Malfoy in a small way. They each had two people that always hung around a central friend. Harry could not help but think that he liked his situation better. The girls were a lot cuter than Crabbe and Goyle, and they were a lot smarter as well. Then his mind shied away from drawing the parallel between his bond-mates and Malfoy's "mates". There was no way he would willingly return to that line of thinking.

"Shall we go?" he asked them.

"Yes, I think she should be back to her quarters by now." Hermione led the way, with Harry and Ginny following and sharing a smile over Hermione's eagerness.

A few minutes later, Hermione knocked on the door of their Head of House's residence. McGonagall opened her door, looking as she

always did, even if it was a Friday evening when most people became more casual.

"Miss Granger, Miss Weasley, Mr Potter. May I help you?"

"Yes, Professor. Do you have time to talk to us for a little while?" Harry asked.

"I have no other plans at the moment. Please, come in." McGonagall showed them to a small living room and bade them to sit.

Hermione looked around and saw a fairly austere room. There was a hanging with a Scottish tartan on the wall as well as a few pictures, but very little else that could be considered personal. There was the couch they were sitting on and a few chairs around a low table in the middle, but very little other furniture. She was disappointed by what she saw until she realized that perhaps this was not where the Professor really spent her time, but where she only entertained visitors -- such as prefects and wayward students.

"What can I do for you? Is there a problem with your classes?"

"No, Professor, our classes are going well so far," Harry answered. "This is of a more personal nature. I'm -- I'm looking for information on my family and I thought you could help me."

McGonagall looked at him for a moment before her expression softened a little from its normal severity. "You are not the first student to come to me to ask that question. To be honest, I'm surprised you didn't come sooner."

"I guess I didn't really think about it much before. I was fairly overwhelmed by the Magical world at first, but I think I'm getting used to it now. I've also had a few reminders about family recently and I guess I'm more curious now." Harry looked at her for a moment. "Professor, if you knew about my family, why didn't you ever tell me

before?"

"Would you like some tea?" she suddenly asked the three students. At a nod from the girls, she got up and went over to a small table to get a tea set and returned. Using her wand, she heated the water in the tea pot and took a couple of minutes to steep the tea while the students watched in silence and wondered what their teacher was contemplating.

As she poured four cups, she started to explain. "I'm afraid there is no easy answer, Mr Potter. In some ways my ... or rather our position as Professors requires a certain amount of separation from the students. We generally don't become very familiar or friendly with our students while they remain students. Seventh years have a little more leeway, and the Head Boy and Head Girl have a little more still, but overall that separation is generally a good policy, I believe."

Harry nodded his understanding.

"I believe you'll find that any professor here will answer your question if you ask, but you will have to go to them." She put her tea cup down on the small table and paused for a few seconds, obviously deep in thought. "In addition, Professor Dumbledore asked the staff not to volunteer any information. He did not forbid us to tell you, but he asked us not to seek you out. I do not agree with that, personally, but professionally yours is a different situation than normal. In my opinion, the normal separation between staff and students should be sufficient."

"Why?" Harry asked, sounding lost, like a bewildered child. "Why would he do that?"

"You are unique, Mr Potter. There are a few other students who do not have their parents, but they all have magical relatives. None of them have as difficult a history as you do. He explained that it is better to live in the future than in the past, and encouraged us to help

you in that way."

"But you don't believe that?" Harry was trying to get a grip on this new information. A part of him felt betrayed.

"No, I don't, which is why I'm telling you what I am. I ask you not to hold it against Professor Dumbledore as he is trying to help you in his own way, but I believe that while one should not live in the past, one cannot ignore it either."

"Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it," Hermione offered helpfully.

"Indeed, Miss Granger. History can be very helpful, but most books also do not have all the facts."

Harry decided he needed some answers. "Professor, what can you tell me about my parents, especially about when they died, and about Sirius Black, and afterwards?"

McGonagall looked uncomfortable and took a sip of tea. "The last war was a terrible time. Many people were killed, usually for senseless reasons." She paused for a moment. "I'm afraid I can't tell you much about that horrible night. Your parents had gone into hiding a few weeks before, ostensibly because it was believed that they were being specifically targeted by You-Know-Who and his Death Eaters. Then we had the news that You-Know-Who had been killed, but at the cost of the lives of both of your parents. Many celebrated the positive outcome and even raised a toast to you and your family. For those of us that knew them, it was a bitter price to end the war."

"And afterwards?" Harry quietly asked, as if afraid to break the moment.

"You asked about Sirius Black. As the story goes, he tracked down Pettigrew and killed him along with some innocent bystanders; he

was arrested for his actions." She shook her head, "It was so senseless."

"I've heard it said that he and my father were like brothers. How do you explain the change?" Since he detected some doubt from her, Harry finally spoke his main question aloud. He wondered what kind of answer he would get from someone who knew both of them.

"I -- I really can't. I was very surprised. The common explanation among those that knew them is that something drove them apart after they left Hogwarts, or that Sirius was being controlled in some way. The explanation that you read in all the books about how Sirius let the Black family way influence him is rubbish -- at least in my opinion."

That answered the question about Sirius's character, but left Harry wondering all the more about what happened at the man's trial before he was sent to prison. "What happened to me after that night?"

"The next day, I overheard a conversation about you so I spent the day in my Animagus form outside of a house watching a Muggle family ... which turned out to be your family. That evening, Professor Dumbledore came as well and Hagrid brought you. You were left on the doorstep with a letter explaining things. I am sad to say that while I told him of my concerns, I did not protest more and I should have. You have my deepest apologies, Mr Potter. I'm sure I've only heard the tip of the iceberg on your childhood, but that is enough to wound me. In the magical world, family is very precious and you should not have been treated as you were."

"Thank you for your concern, Professor." He paused a moment to acknowledge her apology, and to gather his thoughts before plunging onwards. "Err ... did my parents ever talk to you about taking care of me if something ever happened to them?" Harry was curious about how well known their wishes were.

"No, but if they had asked me, I would have willingly taken you in. I probably would have taken a few years off while you were younger, and then let you grow up here when you reached five or six. I think you would have enjoyed it," she said wistfully.

"So, it would surprise you to learn that you were mentioned in my parents' Will and were fourth on the list of people to take care of me?" He watched her carefully and was pleased at her genuine surprise.

"I didn't know," she said very sincerely. "I assume your aunt was at the top of the list and denied me the pleasure."

Harry shook his head. "I found my parents' Will this summer and my aunt was never mentioned in it."

McGonagall's eyes went large. "But that would mean..." She seemed afraid to finish the sentence.

"Professor Dumbledore was on the list, but he was fifth, after you," Harry said evenly. When McGonagall said nothing, he asked, "May I ask you to keep this to yourself?"

"As you wish, Mr Potter," she said with a firm nod. "I can see why you might prefer that to remain private."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said with the barest of smiles. "Could you tell me a few stories about them? Perhaps something happy?"

"Yes, I could with pleasure," McGonagall said, shaking off the darker tone of the conversation so far. "Your mother and father were both wonderful people by the time they finished Hogwarts. Of course, the seven year road was a long one at times."

Harry happily listened to a half-hour of stories about his parents. It seemed that his father was quite the prankster and very good at

Transfiguration. His mother sounded a lot like Hermione, which made the girl blush on several occasions.

He had his information and confirmation that he really needed to talk to Professor Lupin. In the end, he enjoyed the last half of the conversation more than the first half. He thanked Professor McGonagall profusely as they left.

On their way back to Gryffindor tower, Ginny looked at him with concern. "How are you feeling, Harry?"

He sighed and slowed his walk. "In some ways, I didn't learn much and I suppose I'm not too surprised. But in another way, I'm so shocked to have one of my fears verified, that I hardly know what to think. To know that I didn't have to grow up there..."

"Oh, Harry." Ginny grabbed his hand and pulled him into a nearby secret passage. Once the three of them were safely in, she hugged him tightly. "We're here for you, and we'll always be here for you. We love you." She felt him hug her back and she enjoyed the feeling.

Eventually, Harry let go and Ginny stepped back. When she did, Hermione stepped forward and hugged him tightly too. "She's right, we do love you, and we'll always be here for you. We'll support you in every way possible."

"What would I do without you, both of you," Harry said, his voice breaking a little.

Hermione patted his back before she released the hug. "You'd be a mess," she told him matter-of-factly. Ginny giggled which set Hermione off too. Harry joined in by chuckling.

"Thanks, both of you." He grabbed a hand of each and gave them a squeeze. They walked back to their common room in better spirits. Harry put his interviews for tomorrow out of his mind at the moment.

((A/N: As you can see, I'm trying to stay fairly close to the canon story in regards to what happened around Halloween of 1981. I'm also trying to fill in various gaps with "original information" to make the story more complete. The next chapter will fill in more information.))

Chapter 11 -- Interviews, Part 2

On Saturday morning, it seemed like everyone went down to breakfast at the same time. The room seemed uncharacteristically crowded, Saturday usually being a morning for lying-in and lazing about.

As Harry was eating, Ron looked at him. "Is Quidditch practice starting this morning?"

"No, Wood gave us until next weekend off, since school only started a few days ago."

"I think Professor McGonagall made him. We do need time to get acclimated to our new classes," Hermione piped in.

"Acclimated?" Ron asked with confusion.

Hermione ignored him and Harry smiled approvingly at her newfound willingness to avoid arguments with Ron. He was not going to get drawn into that either.

After a moment, Ron asked, "So, what do you plan to do today, Harry? You want to go flying instead?"

"Maybe later this afternoon. I need to talk to a couple of the professors this morning." He ate some breakfast as normally as possible and hoped Ron did not ask any more about his morning. He preferred to keep it to himself and his bond-mates at the moment.

Ron gave a questioning look as if he could not understand why Harry would do that, but did not ask anything else.

The morning owls choose that time to come in. Hermione received her copy of the Daily Prophet. Hedwig flew in and landed in front of Ginny, who took the rolled-up letter and gave Harry's owl a long strip

of bacon. Harry gave her a good petting before she flew off.

Harry looked at her, but Ginny smiled and whispered, "After breakfast," as she stowed the letter in a pocket. Harry shrugged and returned to eating. Ginny was very pleased and could barely wait to read what had been sent to her. She dearly hoped her idea had been a good one.

When she finished breakfast and saw that Harry and Hermione were done too, Ginny rose and tapped Harry on the arm so he would follow her. Hermione naturally followed.

Ginny noticed that Ron got up and started to follow as well. She knew she needed to take care of this. "Hey, Ron, I didn't know you wanted to come discuss Charms with us. Are you behind and wanting to be tutored?" she asked innocently.

Ron's eyebrows went up. "I thought you were joking about talking to a professor."

"Nope," Harry confirmed, struggling to keep his face natural.

"Oh, well, I'll let you take care of that. I'll just go take care of something else." Ron hurried away.

Harry started to snigger. "You're funny, cruel, smart, and sneaky."

"Thanks," Ginny said brightly and flashed him a big smile.

Hermione just shook her head, although a small grin did leak out. "So, Professor Flitwick first?"

"Actually, Ginny said we need to read the letter she received first." Harry directed them to an unused classroom.

Hermione put up an Imperturbable Charm over the door. At the other

two's questioning looks, she explained, "A fourth-year spell I picked up the other day specially for times like this. It prevents people from listening to our conversation through the door."

Harry nodded appreciatively. "Nice one."

They pulled three chairs together and Ginny sat in the middle.

"Who's this letter from?" Hermione asked. Harry was intrigued too.

"After our discussion about not knowing everything and about truth versus common knowledge, I decided to write a letter to Sirius Black..."

"And it worked?" Hermione half-shouted.

"Surprisingly, yes. I would have thought he would have prevented that too. But now we can see what he says. Hopefully he will be truthful with us," Ginny said as she opened the letter. It had small print on both sides -- a long letter. There was also an old newspaper clipping included.

"I told him that we had some doubts about what happened and that we were searching for the truth. I told him that if he told us his side of the story, maybe it would help." Ginny held the letter up. They all began to read.

Dear Ginny (and Harry too),

I believe you're the first person to ever ask me for my side of the story, ever. That has been hard to do lately, as I've been hiding, but you have a very clever and persistent owl. Also, thank you for providing the writing materials, I didn't have any.

You said you're trying to find the truth of what happened the night Harry's parents were killed and shortly after. I can only give you my

story, although I will say that if you gave me Veritaserum or I gave you an oath for honesty, this would still be my story. So it's the truth as I know it.

To start, I must go back to my days at Hogwarts. I was sorted into Gryffindor along with three other boys and five girls. That was a shock to my family, as the Blacks have historically been Slytherins. You'd have to go back several hundred years to find an exception. But I disagreed with my family's views even before I was 11 and started school.

I quickly became friends with James Potter, and then the other two boys: Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew. We found that while we came from different backgrounds, we all liked to have fun. If you've heard of the Marauders there at school, I'll confess that was us, although I'll ask that you not spread that around. Some of the teachers there know, but it might be best to keep that to yourself, lest you get labelled like us. I understand that Remus is teaching there this year. You could ask him for verification.

By the time we finished Hogwarts, Lily Evans had joined us as an unofficial Marauder. At the end of our seventh year, she and James had been dating for a year and looked like they would always be together.

That turned out to be true as they married a year later. Being out of school for a year also allowed us to separate a little. James and I went to Auror school together, so we and Lily still saw one another frequently, but Lupin and Pettigrew were seen less frequently. Lupin has an excuse. While I didn't see it at the time, Pettigrew became much more distant from us, even though he continued to visit us monthly.

When Harry was born, there was much rejoicing from everyone. I was almost as happy as James, and just as proud of Harry. (Harry, James asked me to be your godfather. I am so sorry I have failed you

in that regard, but I'm getting ahead of myself.)

From the time we finished Hogwarts until the summer of 1981, the war progressively got worse. It appeared we were going to lose unless something spectacular was done or we got lucky. To make it worse, Albus Dumbledore (your Headmaster) came to James and Lily and told them some bad news. I don't know what it was, but they decided to go into hiding. We were all fighting as part of a special group to gather information, and we knew we had a leak or a spy in our midst. I believed that was the information Dumbledore told them, but I really don't know. Coincidentally or not, the Longbottoms went into hiding at about the same time.

Now we are getting to the heart of your question.

To hide them, Dumbledore used a charm called the Fidelius Charm. It allows you to hide something by placing the secret of where it is within a single person. So as long as you choose that person wisely, you'll always be safe. As James's best mate, I was the obvious choice for becoming the Secret Keeper. And much to my everlasting shame and horror, here's where things went horribly wrong.

Because I felt I was such an obvious choice, and because there was a spy in our midst, and because there was concern that Lupin was it (he wasn't, as it turned out), I convinced James and Lily to make someone else the actual Secret Keeper. We were to keep pretending that I was the one, to provide a false lead and to protect the real Secret Keeper.

Lily cast the Fidelius Charm to hide them and made Peter Pettigrew the Secret Keeper. Yes, it really wasn't me, even if I hinted to people that I was.

So on that horrific Halloween night, Pettigrew gave the secret of the Potters' hiding place to Voldemort, because it turns out he was really the spy in our midst.

There was an alarm at the house to let me and others know if the Potters were attacked, despite their hiding. When the alarm went off, I flew my motorcycle to their house only to find it in flames along with the bodies of James and Lily in the front garden. Hagrid was there holding baby Harry and would not let me have him, even when I told him I was Harry's godfather. He said Dumbledore told him to get Harry and return to Hogwarts to keep him safe.

Harry, I must apologize to you again. I was in such a state of mind from seeing my best friends lying there dead that I simply lost it. Nevertheless, that does not excuse me from not being the godfather to you that I promised. I never should have left you. I should have given the information I knew to someone like Dumbledore or Moody personally. However, in my mad grief, I left Hagrid my motorbike and took off to search some of Pettigrew's hiding places.

I caught up with him in London the next day on a Muggle street. Pettigrew shouted for everyone to hear that I had killed James and Lily. Then, I'm afraid I can't tell you how he did it, but he cast a spell that somehow caused an explosion as I fired a Stunning spell at him. The explosion knocked me back and turned me daft for a bit so I couldn't think straight. I couldn't help it, but I started to laugh because it was like something out of a bad, cheap novel.

That was how the Aurors found me. Before I could say anything, I was stunned. When I awoke, I was in Azkaban and they told me I had killed twelve Muggles, as well as told Voldemort where to find the Potters. I was called a traitor, spit upon, and punched a few times as I was taken to my cell. My protests of innocence fell on deaf ears.

I thought I could endure that for a few days until my trial, when I could straighten everything out. How wrong I was. Barty Crouch, who was the head of the MLE at that time, and Millicent Bagnold, who was Minister, did not bother to give me a trial. So there I was, in prison without a trial for crimes I didn't commit.

I believe that answers your question and I hope it helps you find the truth. I would dearly love to have my name cleared so that I can live normally, and more importantly, be there for Harry as I should have been all along.

There is one other story that will help you, perhaps even more than the history. The question behind that is: I was in prison for twelve years, why did I break out now? Why not in my first year?

There are several reasons. First, the prison has guards called Dementors. They are horrible, foul, evil creatures that I wouldn't wish upon my worst enemy, other than Pettigrew who deserves that hell and more for betraying everyone. So it took me years to learn how to deal with that. Thinking of my innocence was a good defence. Secondly, it was not until recently that I had the motivation to try to break free. To actually escape was very difficult, and was essentially a one-time chance with a high probability of failure. But Fudge came by on his yearly visit recently and had some compassion on me by leaving me his newspaper. I'm sure that to him, it was punishment to show me the life I was missing, but I didn't see it that way.

To my great surprise, I saw the reason for me being in prison on the front page. In the picture with the Weasleys in front of their home, illustrating the story of how they had won the Galleon Draw, was the betrayer. Pettigrew was alive and I could clear my name and go to my godson. He was living with the Weasley family and he would be at Hogwarts in September.

This is where history is important. You see, Pettigrew is an unregistered Animagus. He can take the form of a rat. They told me that all they ever found of Pettigrew was a finger, and in the picture with the youngest Weasley boy was a rat that I knew all too well, and it had a finger missing on its front paw. I've enclosed the picture. If you need confirmation, show it to Lupin. He should even volunteer to help you capture the rat. Capturing the rat is why I've headed

towards Hogwarts.

If you do try to capture him, be very careful because he can be extremely dangerous (he did kill 12 Muggles and helped Voldemort to kill others). I would suggest stunning him in his rat form, then lock him in a cage with an Unbreakable charm on it. Once you have him, show him to Dumbledore or perhaps McGonagall. They can test to verify he's an Animagus, and then can call the Aurors in.

If they suggest letting him go because there is no evidence, then ask him why he's been hiding for the last 12 years if he was innocent. Also, hiding in the Weasley household without their consent is a crime. And be sure to have them check his left arm for a Dark Mark. While I'm handing out cautions, I'd also suggest being careful of Fudge. He seems the type that will try to prevent this unpleasant truth from being told, as it could be politically bad for him. If you can't find a way to make him look good from it, you'll want to get someone like Amelia Bones in the MLE to do all of the interrogating first before Fudge can become involved. I would prefer you didn't show this letter to anyone else until Pettigrew is found and charged with the crimes I was, but you may if you must to get them to understand my story and to investigate Pettigrew.

Please don't write unless you have important news, as I must still hide, but now that I know what your owl looks like, I will accept a letter from her.

Yours very truly,
Sirius Black

They had all gasped and asked "What?" at various times during reading it, but Harry thought he summed it up well when he said, "Bloody Hell! And I thought my life was messed up!"

Hermione looked at him with a frown and opened her mouth, but she closed it after a few seconds.

"It is appropriate," Ginny said with a giggle.

"Sadly," Hermione agreed. "That confirms and explains most of the inconsistencies."

"Assuming we can trust him," Ginny pointed out. When Harry started to object, she quickly said, "Yes, I know he said he'd make an oath to this, but it's one thing to write it and another to do it."

"So we act as if it's probably true but be cautious?" Harry asked.

"I think that would be best." Ginny looked at Hermione who agreed.

Harry thought about it. "Being cautious can't hurt. All right, let's assume it's true but be on the lookout for information that either supports it or conflicts with it. Hermione, I can't think of anything we know so far that conflicts with this. Can you?"

"No, and it matches Hagrid's story perfectly."

"Right, so on to Flitwick and Lupin, although I now have a few more questions for Lupin. Ginny, can I see that photo please?" He took it from her and looked at it carefully. "It's not the clearest photo I've ever seen, but it does look a lot like Scabbers." He shivered briefly. "And to think I've stayed in the same dorm room with him for two years."

Ginny raised an eyebrow at him before she gave a distasteful look at the photo. "I remember that photo being taken and it is Scabbers. To think I had to live with him in the same house for nine years -- eww!"

"I think we should talk to Professor Lupin before we do anything and let him look at the photo and see if he recognizes the rat. But first, we have that appointment with Flitwick," Harry suggested. The two girls agreed with him, so they left the room in search of the Charms

teacher.

"Luna said it should be over here," Ginny said as she led them to near where the Ravenclaw tower was.

"Who's Luna?" Harry asked.

"She's a Ravenclaw in some of my classes," Ginny explained. "She's very smart and lives not far from me, although I didn't know that until this year. That would have been nice to know before, as maybe I could have had a friend to play with when I was younger."

Hermione shook her head. "You know, that means that none of us had close friends to play with when we were growing up. Ginny had her brothers, and I wished I could have had a brother, but it wouldn't have been the same."

"No, it's not the same, believe me," Ginny said fervently. "Ah, here we are." She walked to the door that said "Flitwick" on it and knocked.

The door opened a moment later. "Miss Weasley, Miss Granger, Mr Potter. What I can I do for you?"

"We were hoping you had a few minutes to tell us some things," Ginny said brightly.

"Certainly. Please, come in." The short man led them to a room that looked very lived-in. It was not messy, but there were personal effects and many books in view, including one that was open on a small table. He waved them to a couch while he sat in a small chair that fit him perfectly. "What can I do for you?"

Harry swallowed, suddenly a little nervous. "Professor, I'm looking for information on my family and I thought that you might be able to tell me about what happened to my parents, as well as anything you might know about that night and me. Anything you could tell me

about Sirius Black would be helpful as well."

The Charms professor raised an eyebrow. "I'm afraid I can tell you very little, Mr Potter, beyond the normal story that is in the history books. While I can tell you about your parents while they were here, I never really saw them after they finished their seventh year. I believe they were doing some work with Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall, and Professor Lupin was their close friend. You should check with them."

"I see," Harry said slowly.

"So you don't know, as opposed to you can't tell us? No disrespect meant, Professor," Hermione added quickly.

"None taken, Miss Granger." Flitwick sighed. "I suppose it won't hurt to tell you that the Headmaster encouraged all the teachers not to seek you out with your family information, on the basis that living in the past wasn't good for anyone. However, he did not forbid it if you should come to us," he said with a smile.

"Professor McGonagall told us something similar," Harry said.

"Ah, good, then I was not the one to let the cat out of the bag," the professor said jovially. "Your parents were fine people, Mr Potter. Your father was not quite as well-mannered when he started school as you are, but he grew up and became an outstanding young man. Your mother was a little shy but very gifted in both Potions and Charms. I offered her an apprenticeship so she could gain her Mastery Certification but, unfortunately, she didn't have time to do that."

Harry smiled. In some ways, the fact that they were not perfect made them feel a little more real. "And Sirius Black? There are so many rumours about him. Was he really my father's best friend?"

Flitwick looked a little pensive now. "While he was in school, it would

be fair to say that he and your father were like brothers. Given that, I find the normal explanation about his guilt to be unrealistic. In the three years that followed their departure from Hogwarts, I'm afraid I can't say because I don't know if their relationships may have changed. Professor Lupin could give you a better answer, I'm sure."

"I plan to visit him next," Harry acknowledged. "Professor, did my parents ever talk to you about me, like taking care of me if something should happen to both of them?"

The professor chuckled. "No, but the thought of me caring for a baby is amusing. I'd have found a nanny house-elf for when I'm busy in class, but otherwise it might have been great fun to have you around as you became older, say from about four onwards." He gave Harry a look that almost put Dumbledore's twinkling to shame. "I might have even made you a Ravenclaw." Everyone chuckled at that.

"So, it would surprise you to learn that you were third on the list of people to take care of me?" Harry asked, curious about the man's reply.

"Very much so. Lily never mentioned it to me at all. I assume the list was Sirius Black, your aunt, and then myself?"

"No." Harry decided it would not hurt to tell him. "The list was Sirius Black, the Longbottoms, and then yourself before two others, neither of which were my aunt."

Flitwick's good-natured demeanour instantly vanished. "Do you know that for a fact?"

"Yes, sir. I found a copy of my parents' Will this summer. It was very specific." Harry watched the man think that through.

"It sounds as if your parents' Will was not executed. Do you also know who your parents' solicitors were? Not that I'm trying to take

advantage of this, Mr Potter — I understand the Grangers are now your guardians and I would not change that — but I wonder what else was missed."

"Uh, the letter with it said Wilkes and Wilkes," Harry told him.

Flitwick sadly nodded. "That would explain it. Bradford and Penelope Wilkes were killed a day or two before your parents, and their law firm was burnt to the ground. It is quite possible your parents did not know of this and so they were unable to make changes. I would highly recommend you take your parents' Will to another solicitor and get professional help with it."

Harry looked at Hermione and then Ginny, receiving two nods. "Do you have any suggestions for me, Professor? I don't know of any solicitors." He also noted that Hermione was writing in her little notebook again.

"I too did business with the Wilkes before they died. I took copies of all my documents to Ted Tonks, he's married to Professor Tonks. I've been very pleased with his work. If you talk to her, I'm sure she could make arrangements for you and her husband to meet and explore options."

"Thank you, Professor. If you have a few more minutes, could you tell me a few stories about my parents, especially my mother?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Of course, Mr Potter. She was a very sweet young lady and a gifted student, much like your two friends."

Hermione and Ginny blushed.

"Hmm," Flitwick murmured thoughtfully. "I remember one time when I went to breakfast a few days after your mother had taken her NEWTs. Much like the ceiling shows the outside sky, the four walls had been

charmed to show the outside in the appropriate direction as well. It was a phenomenal bit of magic that even I would have had trouble duplicating without a lot of study. No-one took credit for the prank and I couldn't prove she had done it, or I would have awarded her points for it." He shook his head. "She must have researched that all year. I truly disliked having to dispel her work, it was so well done."

"That's, that's..." Hermione just shook her head as she thought about that.

"That's how brilliant she was. Almost as good as the Halloween Feast of her seventh year. As soon as the Headmaster bid everyone to 'tuck in', one of the candelabras on the side of the hall walked to the front and started singing a fun little ditty. As it did that, the plates and the silverware became animated and started to dance around with the other candles joining in as choral backup." He sighed. "The charm work was beautifully done and it was fun to watch." A mischievous look came over him. "I got her to admit to me in private that she'd pulled that prank. I gave her fifty points for it!"

Hermione was wide-eyed. "Do you remember what song she used? That sounds very familiar."

"I can't remember all the words, but it started something like this..." The little professor sang with a surprisingly-good tenor voice, putting on what Harry assumed was an exaggerated French accent:

Be our guest,
Be our guest,
Put our service to the test,
Tie your napkin 'round your neck, cherie
And we'll provide the rest...

"Ah, a truly fun time..."

Hermione clapped. "I knew it! It's from a movie and it's one of my

favourite scenes in it."

"Truly grand, Miss Granger. I shall have to track down a Pensieve and we can all see your version as you watched the movie and then I can show you what happened when Lily did it. I believe you will be truly amazed."

"Thank you, Professor. I look forward to that," Harry said. "Do you have any other stories?"

"I also remember when..." Flitwick continued on for the next half an hour. All three students enjoyed the stories, but Harry the most.

At the end, Harry thanked the professor and they left.

As they walked to the next professor, Hermione looked at Harry.

"Nothing new in our search, other than it confirms my opinion something strange is happening if Flitwick also didn't think Black did it," Harry answered the question from the girl's look.

"He seemed to think your parents' Will not being executed seemed important," Ginny pointed out.

"Right," Harry agreed. "We'll need to add that to our list of things to do."

Without breaking step, Hermione pulled out her notebook and pen and placed a star in the margin where she had noted Flitwick's comments.

Harry looked at Ginny and they both smiled at each other about their bond-mate's habits.

When they arrived at Professor Lupin's door, Harry knocked. He stood in front of the two girls as they waited.

The door opened revealing a surprised-looking professor. "Mr Potter? This is a surprise, what may I help you with?"

Harry did not miss that he was still being treated just like all the other students. "Professor, I'd like to speak with you for a few minutes ... about my family."

The man froze for a moment before he gave an uncomfortable smile. "Won't you come in then? That would not be a conversation to hold in the corridor."

The trio walked in and Lupin showed them to a couch in a room that was very neat with few personal effects, much like McGonagall's was. Without asking, the professor found a tea set and served them. Harry could not help but notice that the man's hands shook slightly, making Harry think the man was even more nervous than he was.

"I must say that I'm surprised, Mr Potter. I didn't expect this to happen, or at least not so soon." Lupin was paying careful attention to what he was doing and did not look Harry in the face.

"Oh, why is that, Professor? I understand you were good friends with my parents, especially my father." Harry was not sure why he was being so bold, but he felt like he should take advantage of the situation.

Lupin handed out the cups of hot drink. "The Headmaster led me to believe that you would not seek out your past."

Harry shrugged. "I think it's only natural to want to know about your family. Is it true that while you were here at school that you, along with my dad and two others, were part of a group known as the Marauders?"

The Professor choked slightly on his drink and quickly set his tea

down so he could grab a napkin and dab at his chin. "Where did you hear that?" He looked at Harry in great surprise.

Harry grinned. "There are a lot of rumours and I'm merely trying to find out which are true and which aren't."

Lupin studied the three students very carefully. All three were looking at him raptly. He sighed. "Yes, I was Moony. Your father was Prongs. Our friend Peter Pettigrew was Wormtail, while the last was named Padfoot. Our last year, your mother was made an honorary Marauder, but she didn't have an official name. I hope you don't mind, but I'd prefer not to discuss our activities. I can't do that in good conscience as a professor."

"So at least some of the things I've heard are true," Harry said with a grin, happy he had verified part of Black's story.

"It would depend on what you've heard, obviously," Lupin said with a wry grin, his wits starting to return to normal as his initial shock wore off.

Without missing a beat, Harry said, "I've also heard that Pettigrew was a rat Animagus..."

Lupin's shock returned. "Where did you hear that?" he asked in a whisper.

Harry nodded to Ginny, who pulled out the newspaper clipping and handed it over. "We don't know what his form looks like, but we thought you could verify it."

The professor's hand began to shake as he looked at the clipping. "I ... It can't be, but..." He stared some more before he handed the clipping back to Ginny. "I'm reasonably certain that's him." He shook his head for a moment before he froze. "Then ... that means that Sirius is innocent! Oh Merlin... What have we done?" he whispered

in horror.

Harry looked at Ginny and held out his hand. She didn't have to ask before handing the letter over, which Harry passed to the professor. "Perhaps this will help you understand."

Lupin, his hand shaking more than ever, took the letter and began to read. Harry looked at Ginny and they shrugged, not knowing what else to do. Hermione had pulled out her little notebook and was checking things, as well as making extra notations.

When he finished reading, Lupin put the letter back on the low table in the middle. His hand continued to shake as he picked up his cup of tea and with great difficulty took a drink. He then stared blankly into his cup.

"Professor Lupin?" Harry called to get his attention.

"I'm sorry, Mr Potter, I..." He stopped and brushed unshed tears from his eyes.

"I understand, but before we do something about that, can you tell me anything about the night my parents were killed?" Harry asked when the silence dragged out.

Lupin pulled himself together and shook his head. "No, I'm afraid I can't. For personal reasons, I didn't spend much time with anyone after Hogwarts. I will say that I was very distressed when I heard of their murder. I'm sorry -- Harry."

Harry nodded. "Thank you, Professor. Erm... after they died, you were the last of my parents' friends. Why haven't I met you before now?"

The professor looked down and looked very ashamed, or so it seemed to Harry.

"It's not easy to explain, Harry." He paused but did not look up. "May I call you that since we're not in class?"

"Yes," Harry said softly.

"I have ... personal reasons ... for not involving myself with people, at least not very much. It would have been quite impossible for me to have raised you."

"I won't ask any more about that, but why didn't you at least come and visit me from time to time? You know, pretend you were my uncle or something and see how I was doing?" In some ways, Harry was not completely sure he wanted the answer to that question, but he was curious enough to ask.

Lupin finally raised his head and looked at Harry. "By the time I thought of that, you were hidden by Dumbledore. I approached him to find out where you were, but he refused to tell me. He said that your guardians had been promised no interference from us until it was time for you to come to school. I did try, Harry."

Harry realized that more and more came back to Dumbledore. He looked at his girls and each gave him a sympathetic look. Ginny also momentarily covered his hand with hers. He welcomed the support.

"Thank you, Professor, I appreciate you telling me that you tried. I really wish you'd been successful, but I've been told that life isn't always fair."

"No, it's not ... not at all," Lupin agreed just as solemnly.

"Err, Professor, would you do two things for me? Well, three really." Harry hoped he would say yes.

"If I can..." Lupin said with kindly smile.

"Can we get together and talk sometimes?" Harry tried to make it sound like he was not pleading, even if he was. "I'd like to know more about my parents and you probably know them the best of anyone here at the castle."

Lupin smiled. "Of course. I'll be busier as the year progresses, but perhaps once a month or so would work."

Harry grinned hugely. "Brilliant. Second, since you're the Defence professor, do you think you could teach me how to defend against the Dementors? I never want to have them win over me like they did on the train!"

Hermione backhanded him lightly on the shoulder. "Us, Harry, teach us." Ginny nodded.

Lupin grimaced. "I understand your feelings, truly I do, but the Patronus Charm is a seventh-year spell at the earliest; it's really something that only those who go on to become Aurors normally learn."

"Teach us, please," Harry begged. "I want to learn. Even if it takes longer than normal, I really want to learn."

"Me too," Ginny fervently agreed, looking a little pale, obviously thinking about her experience on the train.

"Yes, definitely," Hermione quickly added, also looking a little less than her best.

"It is rare to see anyone your age react as you did, Harry," Lupin said after a moment. "We can try and perhaps you can make a mist shield. That's not a full Patronus, but enough so that you'll get some relief until an adult can help."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said very gratefully. The girls echoed him. "There's one more thing, if you could?"

"If I can..."

"I know where Pettigrew the rat should be, but I don't know the Stunning spell."

Lupin jerked and sat straight up. "You know?" he whispered, as if not fully believing Harry.

"Can you teach me the Stunning spell?"

"I ... I can, but it would be much better if I came with you. He would be quite dangerous if he thought you knew about him," Lupin said with much concern.

"But can you teach us the spell first?" Hermione asked. "It would be safer if all of us knew it instead of just you," she reasoned.

Lupin lost some of his seriousness and a trace of a smile came to him. "Lily would have said the same thing." Hermione blushed. He looked at Ginny. "You remind me slightly of her, Miss Weasley, at least in the sense that she was a redhead. Do you have a mighty temper?"

Ginny nodded. "At times. I have six brothers and I can keep most of them in line if I have to."

Lupin laughed. "Much like Lily as well. She kept the four of us in line more times than I care to admit." He smirked at Harry and shook his head. "You have interesting friends, Harry." Lupin's voice had finally returned to normal after all of his surprises this morning.

Harry could only nod, feeling that almost anything else would get him in trouble later.

"Now, pull out your wands and let's try it," Lupin directed them as he drew his wand. "Pick a stone in the wall over there as your target. The incantation is 'Stupefy' and the movement is a corkscrew swirl with a jab at the end. Like this: Stupefy!" he snapped, and a red light shot out of his wand and hit the stone wall. "Harry?"

Harry concentrated and tried it. A strong red beam shot out of his wand.

"Very good! Miss Granger, you're next."

Hermione also concentrated and cast. A weak red beam shot out of her wand.

"Good for a first try. That would stop a rat, no problem. Why don't you try a few more times to see if you can improve your power, but aim at the wall over there while I work with Miss Weasley." He turned to the redheaded girl and nodded.

Ginny took aim, thought about what Tom had done to her, and cast. A strong red beam, only a little less than Harry's, came out of her wand.

"Excellent! You surprise me, Miss Weasley, this is normally a fourth-year spell. Did you think of anything else other than the incantation and wand movement?"

She nodded. "I thought of something that made me angry last year and how I wanted revenge."

Hermione was listening carefully.

"Indeed. Many spells can be helped along with emotion as it increases the intent. For this spell, anger would be appropriate." Lupin looked back over. "Miss Granger, one last time before we go."

Hermione thought for a moment. She could think of nothing that made her truly angry. Perhaps an imagined emotion, she considered. Taking aim, she thought about how she would feel if someone tried to hurt Harry. "Stupefy!" The red beam that came out of her wand this time was much stronger than before.

"Very good, Miss Granger. As this is informal and I don't want to play favourites, I'm sorry I can't make this more, but three points to Gryffindor for each of you for learning this spell." He looked at them very seriously. "I must also caution each of you to use this spell responsibly. We don't teach offensive spells until the fourth year for a reason. That gives you time to become a little more mature so you can be a little wiser as you learn the more dangerous spells."

"Yes, Professor," they each told him.

"Very good, then let's go see if we can catch a rat." Lupin led them out of his quarters and towards the Gryffindor Tower.

A small part of Harry wondered at Lupin doing this with him and his friends and not telling McGonagall or Dumbledore. Another part of his mind realized that this "way" seemed normal: a Gryffindor saw a problem and took it upon himself to fix it. This brought home the fact that Lupin had been a Gryffindor.

As they were walking up the long stairs from two floors down, Lupin turned to them and spoke quietly. "Do not mention what you're doing to anyone ... lie if you have to. He could be anywhere in the Tower. We can't let him know we're onto him or we may never catch him. Talk about something normal as you go into Harry's dorm room. Also, I'm going to Disillusion myself when we go in so I'll be almost invisible. If he sees me, then he'll twig something is wrong. Because you'll have trouble seeing me, you'll need to be very careful with your spells, so only shoot if you have a clear shot at the rat!" He grimaced slightly. "This is also a good lesson on why wizards don't fight when invisible -- it's far too easy to hit your own team-mate."

When they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, the woman looked at Lupin and smiled. "Remus Lupin! Or should I say 'Professor'? It's been a long time."

"That it has, my Lady. If you could do me a favour, I'd appreciate it."

"Certainly, Professor."

"Please send word to Professor McGonagall through the other portraits and tell her that I'm helping Harry with a problem in his dorm room and that I request her help. After you open for us, of course."

The Fat Lady smiled. "At once, Professor."

Lupin tapped his head with his wand and promptly disappeared. "Lead on, Harry, but when you get to the boys' stairs, draw your wand and keep it hidden as best you can. You too, ladies."

They all nodded seriously and walked in. As was common for late Saturday morning, about a dozen people were present. Most were playing games, but a few were reading a book of some kind.

"Hey, Harry!" Ron called out. "Come and play some Exploding Snap?"

"Uh, thanks Ron. Let me just nip up to the dorm and I'll be back in a few minutes," Harry lied.

Ron waved and turned back to the game with Dean, Seamus, and Neville.

Harry felt a poke in his back, so he started up the stairs to the boys' dorm rooms. Hermione and Ginny quickly followed, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. He stopped at the door and looked back. The girls both had their wands out and he had to hope Professor

Lupin was there too, as he could not see him at all.

He walked into his dorm room. After the girls walked in, the door seemed to close on its own. Only a little nervously, Harry walked over towards Ron's area. Luckily, Scabbers was there, but he was not in his cage. Instead, the rat was lying in the middle of Ron's bed.

Realizing exactly who this was and what he had done, Harry whipped his wand out and shouted, "Stupefy!" A strong beam of red light hit the rat and flung him off the bed and across the room until he rolled under Dean's bed.

"Accio Wormtail!" said an adult male voice from behind Harry and the rat came flying out from under the bed. The small animal body hit the wall behind Harry and fell to the floor, not moving at all. Lupin rippled into view. "Well, I think we were both a little overly enthusiastic," he said with a big grin, "but task accomplished. Someone get his cage?"

Ginny hurried over to Ron's nightstand, picked up the cage, and handed it to Lupin.

Lupin put the rat in it and cast a few spells on it. "I think that will hold him and..." He looked satisfied as he examined the rat, "That's definitely him." He turned for the door and then stopped and looked back. "Harry, I'll let you present this to the Headmaster if you want, but I think it would be best if I carry it for now."

Harry nodded and walked after the professor. Hermione and Ginny followed too. This was all going so much faster than Harry had envisioned this morning, but Sirius's letter had truly changed things. If this was his parents' betrayer, then Sirius could be free. He wondered how that would affect him. Would he stop living with Dan and Emma? Did he want to? His head swirled with thoughts as they walked down the stairs into the common room.

"Hey, that's my rat!" Ron yelled and hurried over.

At that time, Professor McGonagall hurriedly walked in through the portrait hole. "You needed my assistance, Professor Lupin?"

"Yes, indeed." He turned to Ron. "Mr Weasley, I'm very much aware that this rat has been your pet; however, I'm afraid that I must take him into protective custody for the moment. If things work out as I think they will, then I know someone who will buy you almost any pet you can find in Diagon Alley."

Ron looked at him in confusion before his eyes narrowed a little. "Why?"

"I'm sorry, Mr Weasley, but I can't explain at the moment. Mr Potter will explain it all to you later today. I promise, this is of the utmost importance." He turned. "Professor McGonagall, I don't believe your assistance is needed here after all, but you will want to join us in the Headmaster's office." She nodded and the party of five left behind very puzzled Ron, who the other Gryffindors began to question as to what was happening.

"What is this about?" McGonagall asked as they walked through the corridors.

"Do you recognize him?" Lupin asked as he held up the cage.

"That's Mr Weasley's rat, and his brother Percy's before him," she answered.

Lupin smiled. "Then we were more successful than I imagined." He said nothing more, even when she scowled at him, demanding an answer with her look.

The students looked at one another and smiled, working hard to hold their laughter and giggles in.

"Gumdrops," Lupin told the gargoyle guarding Dumbledore's stairs, then turned to McGonagall again. "He is here, isn't he?"

"To my knowledge," she answered, still scowling.

Lupin had barely finished knocking when they all heard "Enter!"

Dumbledore was alone and raised his busy white eyebrows high as the five walked in. "Oh my, what has happened now?" He did not seem upset in the least, merely curious.

Harry had been debating on what to do during the walk. He had had a plan for their visit tomorrow. He decided to execute it today. "Professor," he looked up at Lupin, "may I answer that? It will take a few extra minutes, but I believe it will be worth it."

"As you wish, Harry," Lupin said. "The hard part is over and explanations may be helpful." He set the small cage on the edge of Dumbledore's desk and the old man looked at it carefully but said nothing. His expression indicated some concern, however.

"Do you recognize this rat, Headmaster?" Lupin asked.

"Not specifically, but I have a suspicion, which I hope is wrong, for if it is not..." Dumbledore finished on an ominous note. He looked around the group before him. "Everyone, please have a seat and help yourself to a lemon drop," he indicated his candy dish. "Mr Potter, I believe you volunteered to explain."

Harry smiled, ignoring the candy there. "I need to start several years before I was born." That earned him an interested look from each of the professors, and Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and got comfortable.

"I understand when my father came to Hogwarts, he became close friends with the other three boys of his year and they did many things

together. Of them, Sirius Black was the closest to my father."

"I assume Professor Lupin told you that?" Dumbledore asked.

"No, sir, but he did confirm it. I've been researching my family history for several months now."

Dumbledore's eyebrows shot back up for a moment, but he said nothing this time.

"After Hogwarts," Lupin seemed to relax a little, which Harry found amusing, "Sirius and my father went to Auror school and my mother had me. I understand the war was not going well at the time."

Dumbledore inclined his head slightly.

"Then in the summer of 1981, something happened and you, Professor Dumbledore, talked to my parents and because of what you told them, they went into hiding." Looking him right in the eye, Harry asked, "What did you tell them, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore blinked, as if not expecting that question. "While I will explain a good many things to you, Harry, I'm afraid I can't explain that one at this time. I must ask you to trust me to wait until the time is right."

"Actually, my parents want you to tell me. They said so in a letter."

Dumbledore sat up, looking almost shocked. "May I ask where you got such a letter?"

"Why didn't you ever tell me I had a family vault, Headmaster?" McGonagall and Lupin looked surprised at Harry's question and then looked at Dumbledore expectantly.

The old man sighed. "Until you turned seventeen, it did not matter,

Harry."

"But it was mine and my family's. I deserved to have it, just like I deserved the key to my trust vault and my father's cloak, which you had." Harry's voice had been even, but the accusation could not be missed.

"I'm sorry, Harry, but I can not tell you why your parents went into hiding at this time," Dumbledore said, sounding older than normal for a moment. "I must ask though, what does that have to do with this rat?"

Harry shook his head and looked at Hermione. She nodded and pulled out her notebook and pen. He knew she would mark the question down to be answered later. "During the summer of 1981," Harry continued the story, "you used a hiding spell called the Fidelius Charm. My mother cast the spell to protect them. According to the commonly-believed story, they picked Sirius Black to be the Secret Keeper. Then on Halloween of 1981, he betrayed them and gave the secret to Voldemort, who came to our house and killed my parents and tried to kill me. Something happened and he apparently died. I'm told there were alarms on the house, so when it was attacked, various people knew, including you, Headmaster."

"That is true," Dumbledore acknowledged. "I sent Hagrid along first while I gathered other forces to help," he supplied, adding to the story.

Harry nodded. "Hagrid pulled my parents' bodies and myself out. Sirius Black showed up and tried to take me, as it was his duty as my godfather, but Hagrid wouldn't let him. Assuming I would be safe for a short time and thinking he could retrieve me later, Sirius left his motorbike with Hagrid and took off."

"Impressive. I assume you've spoken with Hagrid?"

"Yes, sir. While Hagrid took me to Hogwarts for a day, Sirius went to London, and the next morning he trapped Peter Pettigrew. Pettigrew shouted at Black about betraying my parents before Black fired an explosive curse that killed Pettigrew and twelve Muggles. Aurors soon found him and took him away. Meanwhile, that evening you left me with the Dursleys to be raised by my aunt until I got my Hogwarts letter. Would you agree that's what happened, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore looked at Harry for a moment. He knew there was something wrong here. He had his suspicions about the rat, but he was not sure. Also, his Legilimency told him something was off with the story but, surprisingly, he could not fully read Harry with a gentle passive probe as he had the first evening Harry had shown up at school two years ago. Harry should not have been able to learn Occlumency, but it was as if the boy had partial shields. "I would agree that's what's known and probably as close to the truth as we can get." He almost added they would never know, but stopped. If his suspicions of the rat were true, they were about to find out.

"I'm sorry, Headmaster, but you're actually quite wrong and I can tell you the real story." Harry's tone was almost boastful.

Lupin looked very impressed and smiled, making himself more comfortable. McGonagall looked like she wanted to say something, but did not.

"Alas, I've been wrong before and I'm sure it will happen again. Please enlighten us, Harry." Dumbledore leaned forward in his chair and leaned his elbows on the desk, paying closer attention.

"In researching my family, the letter I told you about from my parents was written only a month or so before their death. At that time, they trusted Sirius Black. Everyone I've talked to said that Black turned on his birth family and was more of a brother to my father than to his real brother. So I had to ask how such a huge character change could come to be." He looked to Lupin.

"That has always been my biggest question," the man admitted.

"There's also the question of why he didn't get a trial." Harry looked at Dumbledore.

"I was not Chief Warlock at the time, Harry. I was a normal Wizengamot member. Barty Crouch and Minister Bagnold personally dealt with all the high-profile cases, including Black's. All the evidence pointed to Black being guilty, so I'm afraid I did not pursue the matter."

"What evidence, sir? I'm not trying to be rude, but there's no real evidence other than one person yelling that Black did it." Harry waited.

"I'm sorry to have to dredge this up, Harry, but he was your parents' Secret Keeper and he betrayed them."

"No, sir, that's your assumption, and Sirius may have hinted at it to make everyone think that, but do you know that he was the Secret Keeper for a fact?" Harry waited and wondered.

Dumbledore sighed. "No, Harry, I don't know for certain."

"And do you know that Black really killed Pettigrew and the Muggles? What evidence is there?"

Dumbledore sighed. "That is much clearer. Multiple Muggles saw him cast a spell just before the explosion. Of that, there is no doubt."

Harry nodded and smiled. "What was the last spell cast with Black's wand?"

"That's unknown. I believe the Aurors snapped his wand there at the scene after they stunned him."

"Again, no evidence, sir."

"Harry," Dumbledore said a little tiredly, "I realize you may want him to be innocent, but there is really no doubt about what happened in London."

"Actually, this action has always been Hermione's biggest doubt." He looked at her and she smiled.

"Headmaster," Hermione said respectfully, "according to the story, the explosion that killed so many people left nothing recognisable of Pettigrew's body except a single finger. What spell would have been used to do that?" she asked innocently.

"There is no spell directly, but the Aurors believed a Blasting curse was used and it hit some Muggle gas pipe which exploded. That easily solves it."

"I'm sorry, Headmaster, but it doesn't," Hermione said. "You see, explosions cause things to break apart, not vanish. At best, or worst depending on your point of view, there should have been a lot of Pettigrew left behind, all different body parts," she said a little squeamishly, but did not back down. "But all they found was a finger. That's illogical and impossible. Therefore, that's not what really happened. It would be same as if a Blasting curse was used on a door. The door would not disappear, instead there would be a lot of splinters and door parts."

"That's very well-reasoned, Miss Granger," Lupin said, looking very impressed. "I really should have thought of that as well."

"Then what do you believed happened?" McGonagall asked when no one else said anything.

Hermione looked pleased she was asked. "Everyone forgets to think

about there being at least two wizards there, both of whom had wands. I believe Sirius fired a spell, but it was probably a Stunning spell, although a Cutting curse would work as well. At the same time, Pettigrew cut off his own finger or else a Cutting curse hit his finger, then he cast the Blasting curse before he disappeared. Apparation would have been the easiest way, although there is another method available to him."

"Oh, but of course," Lupin groaned. "I'm so stupid for not thinking of that."

"I suppose it's time for me to ask about my suspicions," Dumbledore said. "I assume you're going to tell me that this rat is the Animagus form of Peter Pettigrew."

"Yes, Headmaster, it is," Harry answered. "Black was not my parents' Secret Keeper, but a decoy. Pettigrew was the Secret Keeper. He was also a spy against you and gave secret information to Voldemort. Lastly, he framed Black for what he did before he went into hiding."

"I see," Dumbledore intoned as he thought it through.

"The worst part is, Sirius Black spent twelve years in prison for crimes he never committed, innocent the entire time just because justice was thrown aside and people were never questioned." Harry shook his head.

"But we never had Pettigrew," McGonagall countered.

"I've never talked to him either, Professor. I talked to you, Hagrid, Professor Lupin, the Headmaster, and Sirius Black."

The adults all looked at him in shock. "You've talked to Black while he was a fugitive?" Dumbledore said with great concern.

Harry was impressed with the Headmaster's look, the power he

radiated. It gave him a much better indication why people thought he was a powerful wizard. "We exchanged one letter, Headmaster. I was never in any danger."

Dumbledore looked much relieved, as did McGonagall. Lupin merely looked amused as he watched.

"Before we give him to the Aurors, I have another question about something that happened at that time, Headmaster." Harry looked at Dumbledore and waited.

Dumbledore looked back a little uncomfortable, but nodded.

"Headmaster, the night after my parents died, Hagrid took me to my aunt's house where, after Professor McGonagall advised against it, you left me there on their doorstep with nothing more than a letter." Now Harry leaned forward. "I'd like to know why."

Dumbledore did not like this question either, but it was not as bad as one he could have asked about his curse scar. "The simple answer is for your protection. By taking you there, I could enact the ancient magic of Blood Wards. Because of your aunt and mother being sisters, as long as you could call it home, it would create a protection that anyone magical desiring to do you harm could not penetrate. The wards I erected are based on the shared blood of your aunt and mother. Voldemort might have not been among the living, but his followers were very much alive and dangerous. In fact, a week after your parents were killed, another family was attacked by Death Eaters and were tortured into insanity."

Harry suddenly understood a mystery. "Neville's parents..."

"Yes, Harry. However, I ask that you, as well as Miss Granger and Miss Weasley, do not bring it up with him unless he speaks of it first. I know that it is a difficult subject for him," Dumbledore solemnly requested.

Harry nodded and saw the girls agreeing as well.

"I'm sorry to say that you failed in your task, Headmaster. The Blood Wards never worked. I was 'harmed' many times while I lived there."

"Not magically and not by Death Eaters," Dumbledore countered.

"Sir, harmed is harmed, whether it's by a Death Eater's wand or my cousin's fist or my uncle shoving me into walls or my aunt starving me." He heard an intake of breath and looked over to see McGonagall with her eyes closed and a pinched look on her face. Lupin did not look much better.

"I was trying to protect you from harmful wizards and I thought it was for the best, Harry..."

"The best for who, Headmaster? Not for me. But there's one other problem. My parents' Will was completely ignored. Why did you do that, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore grew very concerned. He could not honestly answer this or he would have to tell Harry several other things he needed to wait on. "As I said, I had to hurry to get you to a safe place and I did not know where your parents' Will was."

"Did you ask Black? He was my godfather and if he didn't have a copy, he probably knew where one was." Harry did not let up. He really wanted to know about this.

"I'm sorry, Harry, I really don't have a better answer. Sirius was believed to be a spy for Voldemort and responsible for your parent's demise, so that was not something I was thinking about when I thought of him." Dumbledore watched several expressions go across Harry's face, and none of them looked good. He would have to find a way to smooth this over soon. "We do have another problem which

must be solved now. I think I need to call Madam Bones. As head of the MLE, she can put Pettigrew into custody and start the process of clearing Sirius Black's name of all charges."

Harry slowly shook his head at how his problem was being swept under the rug. Well, there would be time for that later. "Black suggested that we contact Madam Bones and he also said that the matter needs to be taken care of before Minister Fudge can become involved. He didn't trust the Minister and thought he would make Pettigrew disappear before Black could be freed."

"I believe that is very insightful," Lupin agreed as he shook his head in consternation. "I owe him a very big apology for doubting him."

"We all do," McGonagall said ruefully.

"True," Dumbledore said as he got up and walked to his fireplace.

A minute or so after he completed his Floo call, the Director of the MLE stepped through along with two Aurors. Dumbledore conjured three chairs for them and went through the Sirius Black story, from Secret Keeper decoy through the battle in London and to his non-trial.

The first words Bones spoke after the story were, "Take him out of the cage and put him in the middle of the floor." Lupin did that and every wand in the room was trained on the rat. No one wanted him to get away. Dumbledore performed the spell to force an Animagus back to his human form. Only Bones and the Aurors were surprised.

"Shi..." Bones suddenly coughed. "Excuse me."

Harry grinned as did Ginny, Lupin, and Dumbledore.

"Use your manacles, Hughes, and then search him. He won't be able to change now," she commented as her orders were followed. The

Auror found two wands on him and a little money.

"Ollivander can verify it, but I expect him to tell you that other wand is Voldemort's," Dumbledore said.

Bones shivered but said nothing. The two Aurors looked very upset at hearing that.

Harry shook his head. "This is ridiculous. You're afraid of a name and it's only a made-up one at that."

"Hey kid," one of the Aurors sneered. "You don't know what you're talking about. I lived through the end of that war..."

"And I had to listen to Voldemort explain where he got his name from before I killed him again last year," Harry retorted.

The Auror snorted. "Right, pull the other one. I don't care if you did stop him as a baby, there's no way you could have ... what did you say ... killed him 'again'?"

"Would a Pensieve memory prove it to you?" Harry challenged.

"I would be interested in that, but it will have to wait," Madam Bones cut in. "You're right, Dumbledore. We've got to take care of this and get it rolling before Fudge can stop it."

"Last I checked, Cornelius usually comes into the office a little later than most. Tomorrow being a Sunday may make a difference too. Also, you only need twenty-four of the Wizengamot to try a case of this magnitude. A full summons isn't needed," Dumbledore commented dryly.

A predatory grin slowly came over Bones' face. "Interesting observations, Dumbledore. Can you hold him here for the next twelve hours? I'll leave the manacles on him and we're the only ones

with a key."

"I'd be happy to." Dumbledore waved his wand and a door on the side of his office opened up. He floated the unconscious Pettigrew into the room and closed the door. "That's the only way into or out of that room." He waved his wand and the door squelched shut. "And now it's locked."

"Excellent," Bones said with a smile only slightly less feral. "I'll be by personally to pick him up at seven in the morning. I'll also send a squad to Azkaban to move Black to a holding cell in the Ministry until his trial, probably on Monday." She turned a little. "Mr Potter, you won't be needed at the trial tomorrow, but I'll see you here next Saturday at ten in the morning to view a memory. Please meet me in the entrance hall."

"Yes, Director."

"I'll be sure he's there and then take us to a private room," Dumbledore smoothly said.

Harry was not sure he appreciated that and it looked like Madam Bones did not either, but she did not argue.

"Thank you, everyone," Bones said before she led the Aurors away via the Floo network.

"I also thank you for correcting an injustice Harry, Miss Granger, and Miss Weasley. As it is not for a school function, I can not give points, but perhaps if I can talk Professor Lupin into it, would a day for the four of you in Hogsmeade be a suitable reward?"

Harry looked back and forth. Seeing two bright smiles, he answered, "Yes, Headmaster, that would be very nice. If my godfather could make it, that would be even better."

Dumbledore chuckled. "I'll see what I can do. You three run along and enjoy your day. I believe you can still make lunch if you hurry." Harry led the girls out.

As they neared the Great Hall, Hermione could not wait any longer. "Harry, you realize there were two questions he wouldn't answer?"

"Yes," he calmly said.

"How can you be so calm about it?" Ginny asked.

"Because I think I can get one answer out of him soon, and I have a feeling he wouldn't answer because the two questions are related. So if I can get him to answer one, I'll have the answer to the other one as well."

Ginny started to giggle. "Don't look now, Harry, but I think Hermione is rubbing off on you. You're starting to sound just like her." The other two blushed.

Harry led them into the Great Hall and over to their usual places. Ron moved over as they sat down. "Well?" he asked.

"Give us time to eat, and we'll go somewhere and explain. This is too public," Harry told him.

Ron looked a little upset, but nodded.

After lunch, the three and Ron found an unused classroom, where Harry explained that Scabbers was really Pettigrew. Ron did not want to believe them, so Harry took him to see McGonagall. When their Head of House confirmed it and asked Ron not to say anything, he finally understood they were not pulling a prank on him. At the end, he got mad at the Animagus for tricking him. Harry smoothed Ron's ruffled feathers by telling him Sirius would get him a new pet at the store in Diagon Alley. If Sirius did not, Harry would.

((A/N: I want to copy a reply to review here, as others may have the same question. Basically, why am I following canon so much and not being more original with the story line?

There are two parts to the answer. The first is that I had planned from the beginning to start off much like canon and then show the differences because of Harry's power, allowing me to compress the storyline and move things along more quickly. Of course, the more things change, the more those changes cause other changes -- but all down the line, so the beginning has less change. Like a top, it spins well at first, then slowly begins to wobble more and more as time goes on. This story has already started to deviate from canon and will continue to do so more and more. The second reason some things from canon will appear in the story is because they are so big, they just can't be skipped if you are anywhere near the canon storyline. As I started near it, I have to let some of those things happen. You should also know that by this point in the storyline, only the most major events (and directly supporting events) will happen.

Case in point, we just finished the major event from year three of canon, yet there are still 2 more chapters left for this year.

About the reference to a certain animated movie in this chapter... My beta NotACat says: Sorry to be pedantic (not really :) but the movie was released in 1991...so while Hermione might well love it, there's no way Lily ever saw it. :(

To which I must reply: ARGH! I'll also say that this is a case of a scene working so nicely in my head that I'm going to ignore reality here. Let's all just pretend that Lily was able to see that movie back in about 1975. :))

Chapter 12 -- New Directions

On Monday morning, Harry got up a little early and went to find Professor Tonks in her classroom before breakfast. She was there, writing notes on the board for her first class.

"Professor Tonks, do you have a moment?"

She turned around and smiled at him. "Of course, Mr Potter. What can I help you with?"

"I, uh, I was speaking with Professor Flitwick the other day and he suggested I talk to a solicitor about a personal matter. He recommended your husband in particular. Would you be able to arrange an appointment for him to come here, so that we might talk?" Harry asked hopefully.

Her smile twisted wryly. "That was unexpected, but I can pass on the message. If you'll give me a topic, that might help as well."

"Oh, right," Harry said a little bashfully. "This is in regards to my parents' Will. Madam Bones will be visiting me on Saturday at ten and that might be a good time."

The professor looked very surprised. "I see. I'll pass the message along and let you know tomorrow."

"Thank you. I'll see you in class tomorrow." Harry left happily, heading towards the Great Hall for breakfast and to meet his bond-mates. He was also looking forward to see the Daily Prophet this morning.

Ginny and Hermione were waiting for him at the Gryffindor table where he slipped into his usual place between them. They each gave him a questioning look and he nodded and smiled. They smiled back and continued to eat.

"What?" Ron asked, sitting across from them.

Harry wondered why he had picked this time to be observant. "Nothing important, I just had a quick talk with Professor Tonks."

Ron nodded and went back to eating.

Harry looked at Ginny, who gave him a look that he interpreted as "What do you expect?" and returned to her breakfast.

The owls arrived a short time later, and Hermione gasped as she read the headlines. "Look, Harry!" She turned it to him and he read: Sirius Black Is Innocent!

Harry grinned. "Finally!"

"You knew?" Dean asked from across the table.

"Yes, I helped piece the story together about what really happened. He's my godfather," Harry said proudly.

"But..." Seamus started to object, looking lost.

"Yeah, I know," Harry agreed. "Once again, common knowledge is wrong and the Ministry made another horrible mistake by putting an innocent man in prison." He looked at Hermione. "Does it say anything about what they did because of their mistake?"

Hermione skimmed the article. "Let's see... Peter Pettigrew was found guilty of fourteen counts of murder, two of those for your parents... Sirius Black was tried in absentia and found not guilty... You're credited with finding the truth... The Ministry apologized and promises to buy him a new wand... Compensation will be set at some future time... The Dementors around Hogwarts have been returned to Azkaban... Um, those are the highlights, Harry."

"And nothing about punishments for Barty Crouch or former Minister Bagnold for what they did?" Harry asked.

"No, only that an investigation on how this happened will be conducted," she answered.

Harry shook his head. "At least he's out. I think I'll write him a letter during History, since I'm ahead in the book."

Hermione gave him a slightly disapproving look, but she did not object verbally.

The next morning, Dumbledore stopped Harry and his bond-mates as they neared the Great Hall for breakfast. "Harry, may I have a quick word please?"

"Yes, sir." Harry walked over while the girls waited for him.

"I have talked to Professor Lupin about your trip to Hogsmeade and we've made arrangements for the Saturday after next. So you have about a week and a half if you'd like to arrange a meeting with your godfather for that same day."

"Thank you, sir. I'll send him a letter."

"You're welcome. Glad I could help," Dumbledore told him with a smile and a twinkle.

Harry walked back over to Hermione and Ginny. "Our trip to Hogsmeade is Saturday, a week and half from now. I'm going to send a letter to Sirius and see if he can meet us then."

"Good idea," Ginny said. Hermione agreed as well.

The arrival of the owls that morning brought Hedwig to visit. "Hedwig?" Harry was surprised to see her so soon. He petted her with one hand while he removed the letter with the other hand. Ginny fed Hedwig some bacon while Hermione moved an extra goblet over and filled it with water for her.

Harry,

I can't tell you 'thank you' enough for what you've done for me, although I do plan to try. As soon as I saw your letter, I rushed to Hogsmeade and found a newspaper. I was so surprised to read what you have done for me. You're very special, kiddo. I'll be in contact with you as soon as I take care of a few things, and then we can get together. I can't wait to see you again.

Sirius

Harry smiled and showed the note to each of his girls.

"I'm so happy for you, Harry!" Ginny squealed and gave him a hug.

Hermione gave him a hug next. "Are you going to tell him about Saturday after next?"

"I will. I can hardly wait to meet him and see what he's like," Harry said with a grin.

"What who's like?" Ron asked.

"Sirius. He is my godfather and should have raised me." Harry was very happy.

"Harry? Where will you live?" Hermione asked a little hesitantly.

He looked at his best friend and grabbed her hand that was twisting

nervously in her lap. "I don't plan to move. That's what you're asking, aren't you?"

She nodded and smiled at him. "I'm glad."

"Me too. Sirius will be a part of my life, just like Dan and Emma are too. I'll spend time with both," he assured her, which made Hermione smile happily. Harry looked at Ginny and she seemed happy for him too.

A tan owl, easily recognizable as Archimedes, flew in just as most of the other owls were leaving and landed in front of Harry. Harry pulled the letter off and looked at Hermione, who shrugged as she petted the family owl and gave him some ham. Harry opened the letter and the two girls leaned over to read with him.

Harry,

We were surprised to see your name in the newspaper this morning. It looks like they left a lot out as far as what happened to you and what you did. Please write ASAP and let us know.

Love,
Emma

"I suppose I shouldn't be too surprised about her asking," Harry said as he finished reading. "I don't think they should be too upset considering all I did was interview some people. Do you?" he asked Hermione.

"No, that should be fine. You should mention that Professor Lupin captured Pettigrew though," she suggested.

"Right, good idea."

As they got up to go to class, Ron got his attention. "Harry, can I talk

you for a minute? Just the two of us?"

Harry had noticed a few strange looks from his sometime friend since he had received Sirius's letter and wondered if Ron was about to tell him what they were about. They walked over to the side of the Great Hall.

"What's up, Ron?"

"Uh, you were hugging Ginny back there."

"We were both hugging each other. So?" Harry wondered what this was about.

"And she spends a lot of time with you."

"She does." Harry managed not to roll his eyes only with huge effort. "So?"

Ron looked uncomfortable. "Do you, uh, do you fancy her?"

Harry could not believe Ron was asking this. "Ron, she's one of my two best friends and just like my other best friend, Ginny is a girl. I've found that girls like to hug when they're happy."

"Yeah, but do you fancy her?" Ron did not seem to want to let go of the issue.

Harry didn't bother with the effort this time and rolled his eyes anyway. "I don't know, Ron. When I figure it out, you'll be the ... fourth to know, right after myself, Ginny, and Hermione." Harry walked away, leaving Ron looking very confused.

"What did he want?" Ginny asked when Harry joined the girls.

Harry grinned at her. "He wanted to know if I fancied you." Both girls

giggled.

"What did you tell him?" Ginny looked at him very expectantly.

"I told him he'd be the fourth to know when I figured it out."

Ginny giggled and Hermione chuckled.

"He's so thick and clueless. I'll talk to him later to better help him to understand that he has no say in the matter," Ginny shook her head. "See you two at lunch," she said as she left for her first class of the day.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other and they both chuckled again. "If he only knew the way things really are," she whispered to him.

"I hope to postpone that conversation for as long as possible," Harry whispered back fervently.

When they walked into Potions class, Professor Tonks walked over and handed him a sealed note before returning to the front of the class. Harry quickly opened it. Ted Tonks agreed to meet him on Saturday and Harry needed to bring his copy of the Will. That put a smile on Harry's face as class started.

That evening, Harry wrote his "mother" a letter explaining what had happened and how he had done nothing more than talk to people and solve a mystery. It took several tries to ensure that there was no hint of danger in the letter. Satisfied at last, Harry gave it to Hedwig to deliver.

Come Saturday morning, Harry was very nervous about each of his two meetings. He knew he was not in trouble, and yet he recognized the importance of each meeting. Of course, part of the problem was that he knew Dumbledore would be at one and Harry was not sure

how he felt about that.

He, Hermione, and Ginny had talked about this morning extensively over the last week. On one hand, Dumbledore was considered the leader of "the good side" and he seemed to try to do what was right. On the other hand, he had made a number of rather large mistakes with Harry, and was withholding information that Harry thought he should have. In the end, he was a little confused about how to feel about and deal with the aged wizard. Therefore, he was being cautious.

At the moment, he was standing outside the front door of the castle with Ginny and Hermione, waiting and watching the path to Hogsmeade. Each girl was doing her best to calm him: Ginny by placing a hand on his arm and rubbing lightly, and Hermione by whispering calming words to him. He appreciated both of them.

Albus Dumbledore stood in the doorway to the castle and looked out. He had two rather large concerns at the moment, and he was not sure which was the most problematic. Not too far in front of him were Harry Potter and his two closest friends. Almost two years ago, Harry had forced a change in many of his plans by changing his guardians from the Dursleys to the Grangers. That one change had forced a number of other changes as well. Even now, things were still changing and he had no idea how to get his plans back on track. In fact, he was starting to seriously entertain the possibility that it was not possible to get his previous plans "back on track" and that he would have to come up with entirely new plans to deal with Harry Potter and Voldemort.

Closely related to that, Albus was not sure what to do about Voldemort now. He had hoped to lure him into a trap two years ago, to show the world that the Dark Wizard was still alive so the war could be restarted and the evil defeated forever. That had required him to lead Harry down the appropriate path, but that path was now gone. With that change to his plans, he was presently unsure how to

demonstrate that Voldemort was still alive before he did something truly evil or regained a body. Worse still, Albus feared that the meeting this morning might force him to make a choice in this battle before he had a chance to actually make new plans with forethought. Decisions made on the spot seldom turned out well in the long run.

Harry finally saw his visitors coming. He noted that there were four people walking up the path from Hogsmeade and wondered if one of them was Sirius. Sirius had replied to his last letter and said he would meet them in Hogsmeade a week from today, so Harry did not think his godfather would show up now, but he also did not know who else might come with Madam Bones or Ted Tonks. Perhaps Madam Bones was bringing two other Aurors as guards, he considered.

The girls waited silently, Hermione on his left and Ginny on his right. A part of him found it interesting that they almost always took the same positions, even moving around him if necessary.

The four visitors, one woman and three men, seemed to be chatting amicably as they approached Harry.

"Mr Potter, it's good to see you again."

"Madam Bones." Harry gave a small bow to the speaker, whom he recognised from her previous visit.

"I understand you also have a meeting with Ted Tonks?" She held her hand out, indicating the man on Harry's far left.

"Mr Tonks." Harry shook the man's hand. He appeared to be middle-aged, with sandy brown hair that was thinning, and had a bit of a beer belly. He also had an easy-going smile.

"Mr Potter, I'm pleased to meet you. My wife has said you're a good student," the solicitor told him.

"Thank you," Harry replied, reddening only slightly in embarrassment.

"I hope you don't mind, Mr Potter, but I brought a couple of associates with me who I feel can add to this discussion and perhaps even give us some good advice." Bones indicated the man on her left. "This is Rufus Scrimgeour, the head of the Aurors."

"Mr Potter."

"Mr Scrimgeour." They shook hands. Scrimgeour was an older with hair that was turning grey, and had walked with a slight limp. He appeared as no-nonsense as Madam Bones.

"And this is Algernon Croaker, the head of the Department of Mysteries," Bones introduced the man on her right.

"Mr Potter, it's a pleasure."

"Mr Croaker." Harry shook his hand too. He was a very thin man with dark hair and a scar on the left side of his jaw. It was very hard to guess his age.

The man smiled thinly before stepping back to his place. "I see that your Headmaster is waiting in the doorway. I presume he will be joining us?"

"I would not be surprised if he tries to," Harry replied. "I'm not sure how I feel about that, so I will leave that decision up to you."

"It might be useful for him to join us," Croaker said. Bones and Scrimgeour did not object.

Harry looked at the solicitor. "Mr Tonks, I would assume you need a little time to read the document in question. If you don't mind, I will meet with the others first and then you afterwards. In addition, my

two best friends will be available to answer most questions you might have. They have my full trust. This is Hermione Granger and Ginny Weasley."

Ted Tonks smiled at them. "Miss Granger, Miss Weasley, I'll be delighted to have your company. My wife tells me good things about you two as well." Both girls blushed slightly at the compliment.

The three from the Ministry nodded and said a brief hello to the girls.

"If you'll excuse us, I'll meet with you as soon as I can, Mr Tonks. Hermione has the document you need," Harry told the solicitor.

"Of course, Mr Potter."

"Madam Bones?" Harry turned and walked towards the castle. He stopped at the doorway because the Headmaster was there.

"Amelia. Rufus. Algernon." Dumbledore greeted each by name, his easy familiarity showing they had known each other for many years.

"Albus," Bones spoke for the group. "If you plan to join us, would you kindly lead us to a room?"

"Of course." Dumbledore turned and led them to the nearby Trophy Room.

Harry saw Hermione leading the other group off to a classroom they had already scouted out.

Inside the Trophy Room, Dumbledore cast several privacy spells over the doors while Bones conjured a round table and five chairs. Croaker reached into his robes and pulled out a small stone bowl and placed it in the middle of the table. Harry took the chair with Croaker on his left and Dumbledore on his right.

"Mr Potter," Bones took charge as they all sat, "this is a Pensieve. It will allow us to see your memory of the event in the Chamber of Secrets. It will not hurt you, nor are you in any trouble for what you've done. This meeting is to share information, and from the information we gather and share, I hope that good decisions and plans for the Wizarding World can be made."

Hermione had told him about Pensieves, but he had never seen or used one. "Yes ma'am. What do I need to do?" Harry's nervousness had gone away during the greeting outside, but it was coming back now.

"Touch your wand to your temple and think of the memory you want to share, then slowly pull your wand away and place the substance on the tip of your wand into the bowl," she instructed. "That will produce a copy of the memory."

Harry thought about what happened last year and did as he was told. As he pulled his wand away, a silvery mass, tangled up like spaghetti, was attached to the end of his wand. He dropped it into the bowl.

"Very good," Bones said. She used her wand to tap a rune on the bowl and a miniature Harry standing in a cave staring at the door to the Chamber of Secrets was projected above the stone bowl. They all watched Harry hiss at the door and it opened. Bones and Scrimgeour looked a little alarmed, while Croaker's interested expression never changed.

The memory continued and showed everything as Harry saw it, from him walking in until Riddle was destroyed and before the bonding. Harry did not think they needed to see anything beyond that. When the memory stopped, everyone looked at each other, but no one said anything for a long moment.

"Thank you, Harry," Dumbledore said, breaking the long silence. "Even knowing the story beforehand does not compare to seeing

that."

Amelia Bones cleared her throat for a second. "I'm impressed, Mr Potter. I'm not sure how many of my Aurors would have lived through that if they had been in your position, but I suspect it would have been damn few." She looked at Scrimgeour.

The man shook his head in amazement. "I'm afraid I have to agree," Scrimgeour said quietly, still coming to grips with what he had seen.

"You have my congratulations as well," Croaker said with a nod, "but I am most disturbed by the implications of this." He looked at Dumbledore.

"What do you mean?" Bones asked.

Croaker's stare never wavered. "How long have you known he didn't fully die?"

"What?" Scrimgeour asked, looking and indeed sounding perturbed. Bones did not look any happier.

"We've just seen evidence that Voldemort did not fully die in 1981. How long, Albus?" Croaker waited.

After a long pause, Dumbledore finally said, "I've suspected it since the beginning, but I've never seen concrete evidence until this."

Croaker's eyes narrowed. "You've had other -- partial -- evidence?"

Dumbledore paused again. He was trying to decide what to do. Did he want to form an alliance with these people? He felt a mild brush against his Occlumency shields and quickly looked up.

Croaker was giving him a piercing look. "You might be the most magically powerful person in the room, Albus, but I represent a very

powerful force as well. You may have many political contacts, but I have contacts of a dozen people just like myself in the field of magical research: people who trust me as I trust them, with a breadth of knowledge you can not hope to match, Albus. Do not go this alone; it would be folly."

Harry watched the struggle going on in front of him in awe. He sat very still, hoping he would not be noticed for the moment.

Could this be the way forward, Albus asked himself. Since he could not make his original plans work anymore, perhaps if he shared the burden? He knew he would have to work behind the scenes to stay in control, but Croaker's knowledge could be very beneficial. It could also speed the process up.

It took nearly half a minute, but Dumbledore finally inclined his head very slightly. "Tentatively?"

"Alliances must start somewhere," Croaker said. He looked to Bones who nodded.

Dumbledore relaxed a little. "Almost two years ago our Defence teacher mysteriously died."

"I remember. Quirrell, wasn't it?" Croaker asked.

Dumbledore nodded. "We could never fully explain why he died, but it looked like he had a seizure. I believe Voldemort was involved somehow." He did not want to mention that Quirrell had probably been possessed. That would have brought up a question he did not want to answer.

"That was shortly after the removal of the Philosopher's Stone, was it not?" Bones asked.

"It was, and that timing is what makes me wonder about it,"

Dumbledore said.

Croaker turned to Harry. "I saw you pick up the destroyed book at the end. What became of it?"

Harry was startled to be suddenly brought back into the conversation. "I, uh, I gave it the Headmaster."

"It is in my office." Dumbledore answered the implied question from Croaker's look, "There are traces of residual magic on it, but not enough to help me know what it was."

"The girl was possessed, was she not?" Croaker asked.

"Yes," Dumbledore replied while Harry nodded.

"There is only one known way, that I'm aware of, to do that that from an object." Croaker looked uncomfortable as he looked to his two companions. "The only question left is if Mr Potter truly ended Voldemort's ability to return or if there are more soul containers left."

"What are you talking about?" Scrimgeour asked.

Harry thought that an excellent question, given that he was lost as well. Bones also did not seem to immediately know the answer either.

"Voldemort put parts of himself, fragments of his soul, into containers, such as that diary," Croaker explained. "While they exist, Voldemort will not pass on to the other side and he can be resurrected. If he only created one container, then he is well and truly dead now thanks to Mr Potter's actions. If he made more, then he can still return at some future time."

Bones shook her head. "Shit!"

"Crude but accurate," Croaker agreed levelly. "The problem is made worse by our present Minister."

"I believe 'political nightmare' would be more accurate," Scrimgeour added softly.

"And the Wizengamot will be of no help either," Dumbledore said. "In fact, a number of them would work against us."

"It starts with us five," Croaker said as he looked around the table.

"Seven," Harry quickly said. "I will have to tell Hermione and Ginny. I'll swear them to secrecy, but I'll have to tell them."

"Why?" Bones asked.

"Actually, that might be a very good idea," Dumbledore said with his twinkle appearing for the first time in the meeting. "Miss Granger is one of the most intelligent students in the school and Miss Weasley is not far behind her."

"We do everything together," Harry told her. "I trust them with my life, as they trust me. They would be here now if they did not have to be with Mr Tonks."

Harry noticed that Croaker was looking at him very intently for a moment before the man reached into his robes and pulled out a short quill and a scrap of parchment. He wrote quickly and then folded it and handed it to Harry. Everyone watched him take it and slowly open it near his face. The note contained only a single word: "Bonded?" He went wide-eyed at the question, wondering how the man could possibly know.

"I think that answers my question, and I fully agree with Harry's request to tell the two young ladies." Croaker pulled out his wand and Vanished the paper Harry had placed face down on the table.

"Moving on, we must decide what to do next."

Bones looked at Croaker for a few seconds and then nodded in acceptance of his decision and slightly unusual behaviour. Scrimgeour accepted the man's lead as well. Dumbledore said nothing, but looked at Harry thoughtfully.

"Is there any way to ascertain whether Mr Potter's recent actions have ended the problem or if there is another soul container?" Bones asked.

"Not that I'm aware of, but we must be on the lookout for others," Croaker said.

"Would it help to interview the Death Eaters we have in Azkaban?" Scrimgeour suggested.

"Excellent idea," Dumbledore agreed. "We should also start researching Tom Riddle's past, from 1945 until 1981. There should be clues in his history."

"Can the two of you start with the Death Eaters?" Croaker asked as he looked at the two from the MLE.

"Yes, we'll start that, and we can keep it covert," Bones agreed.

"Meanwhile Albus and I will start the research into Voldemort's past." Croaker looked to Dumbledore and received a nod. "Mr Potter, at this time your task is to start learning to defend yourself as much as you can, as I believe you will have more to do later." He paused and looked at Dumbledore.

"No, Algernon, it is not yet time," Dumbledore said firmly, answering the implied question.

Harry noticed that Bones and Scrimgeour looked as puzzled about

this as he felt.

"You would deny him what is his to know?" Croaker sounded surprised.

"I would deny the burden for as long as possible," Dumbledore answered. "It can not help."

Harry suddenly understood. He looked at Croaker. "You know why my parents went into hiding. You know the truth Dumbledore will not tell me, don't you?"

"I..."

"No! I forbid it." Dumbledore interrupted, his power flaring.

Croaker shifted slightly, although his gaze never left Dumbledore. "I do not have the answer, Mr Potter, but I do know how to get the answer."

"How?" Harry quietly asked, determined to have his answer. He was seething on the inside at Dumbledore's repeated refusal to tell him about this mystery, although he was doing his best to look normal.

"Come visit me at the Ministry during your holiday and I will show you," Croaker offered.

"You would fracture our alliance so soon?" Dumbledore threatened.

"I would treat Mr Potter as a person, Albus. If what I suspect is true, he has more right to the truth than you do," Croaker said, not backing down.

It was silent for a long moment.

"I believe we all have our assignments," Dumbledore finally said. No

one said anything, so he stood.

Harry realized this was the end of the meeting. As everyone started to leave, he hurried over to the head of the MLE. "Madam Bones? Since you have been so helpful to me, could I ask you to stay for a few more minutes to help me with something else?"

The normally stern woman smiled at him. "Certainly, Mr Potter. You've been most helpful this morning; the least I can do is to return the favour."

"Harry, I'm available to help as well," Dumbledore offered.

"No thank you, Headmaster," Harry replied with a forced smile. "This is personal business." He turned his back, not really wanting to know what the Headmaster's reaction to his rejection was.

As they reached the entrance hall, Harry turned to Croaker. "Mr Croaker, thank you for your kind offer. I'll send you a letter for an appointment."

"You're most welcome, Mr Potter. I look forward to our meeting," Croaker said with a bow.

"Mr Potter." Scrimgeour gave a curt nod and started walking off with Croaker.

"Madam Bones, if you'll come with me, please?" Harry led her down a corridor, leaving Dumbledore behind. At the appropriate door, Harry knocked twice, paused, and then knocked once more. A moment later, Hermione opened the door.

Once the newcomers were inside, Ted Tonks put the privacy charms back up. "You have good timing, Mr Potter. Miss Granger and Miss Weasley have been most helpful in explaining a few things and I believe I can explain your options." He nodded to Bones to

acknowledge her presence.

"May I ask why I'm here?" Bones looked at Harry.

"Madam Bones, I discovered my parents' Will this summer and we've also found that it was never executed," Harry explained. "Also, actions were taken by some people that were in direct violation of my parents' Will."

"I understand. Is it correct for me to assume that you're concerned that laws may have been broken?" Bone asked very seriously.

"That is a valid concern. I don't know that I'll do anything about it, but I would like to know my options," Harry told her.

"Very well." She leaned back in her chair and looked carefully at Ted Tonks.

The man cleared his throat. "Yes, well, let me explain the Will, then we can discuss what needs to be done. The first issue is why it was never executed. The original firm of Wilkes and Wilkes was unable to provide service due to their death very shortly before the death of James and Lily Potter. The matter is further complicated by the fact that the backup executor was incarcerated and never allowed to execute or have a proxy execute the Will."

Bones shook her head ruefully. "Let me guess, the executor was Sirius Black."

"The backup executor after the solicitors, but otherwise correct," Tonks answered.

"I am so sorry, Mr Potter," Bones apologized. "The Ministry has failed you in several ways."

"Thank you, Madam Bones," Harry said graciously. He looked back

at Tonks.

"But now that we know about the Will, I can help execute it if you will hire me. The charge will be thirty Galleons for a simple one like this."

"Please," Harry asked.

"Thank you for your trust, Mr Potter. I will need to see the original copy in your vault. Since I don't believe there is any hurry, we can do this during your Christmas break," Tonks suggested.

"That's fine with me," Harry agreed.

"Once I've verified this copy," Tonks continued, "I can fill out the forms and work with Gringotts to disburse the gifts to Sirius Black and to Remus Lupin as specified. I would guess you would like to contest the gift to Peter Pettigrew based on the recent revelation of his betrayal of your parents?"

"Of course!"

Tonks looked at Bones.

"I don't see any problem with that. I can't imagine anyone sticking up for him," she said, "and as he contributed to your parents' death, it should be easy to disqualify him."

"Very good. As you know, Mr Potter, the rest of your parents' estate, holdings, and money all go to you, although you may not access it until you are seventeen. The goblin team that was hired to manage the holdings will continue to do so until you are of age." Tonks looked up from the document. "Do you have any questions on that before we handle the second major declaration?"

"No, sir."

"And now the part the young ladies tell me you are most interested in."

Harry nodded.

"The Will is quite clear on what was to be done. However, there is the problem that the Will was unknown. Because Albus Dumbledore was on the list, no matter how far down he actually came, I'm afraid to say that you have very little legal recourse," Tonks explained.

"But, but ... he violated the Will!" Harry objected.

"True," Tonks said as he put the document down on the table in front of him and looked at Harry in the eyes. "The problem you face is that in order to get legal satisfaction, you would have to take Dumbledore before the Wizengamot for judgment. For the Wizengamot to rule in your favour, they would have to again admit that they were wrong in the case of Sirius Black. If you haven't figured it out by now, the Wizengamot never likes to admit they were wrong and only does so about once a century, figuratively speaking. They just admitted error last week and so odds are, not much will come of your claim. If you were lucky, Dumbledore would get his wrist slapped with a thousand Galleon fine, but nothing else would happen. His reputation wouldn't even get a smudge on it over this as he will claim he was trying to protect you and that you did go to stay with family, even if they were Muggles."

Harry looked at him dejectedly. Ginny reached out and covered his hand with hers and gave him her best comforting smile.

"That's my opinion of course. Amelia?" Tonks looked at the woman.

"May I read the section in dispute?" She took the page from the solicitor and quickly read through it before handing it back.

Bones sighed slightly. "Legally, I'm afraid I have to agree. I can't

come up with any significant crime to charge him with since he was on the list. Politically, I have to agree as well. In fact, were you to go after Dumbledore for this, your reputation would suffer more than his. You could argue that Dumbledore should have held onto you for a few days or a week to search for your parents' Will before placing you with your aunt. He could probably successfully argue that he did that, since the Wilkes were dead and Black was in Azkaban."

"Quite right," Tonks said. "Ignoring the legal-speak, the Wizengamot would probably say, 'Bad luck, old chap'. If you want compensation from Dumbledore for placing you with the Dursleys, I'd advise you to ask him privately. I imagine he'll say 'no', at which time you should drop it. Of course, I am a solicitor, so if you wish to take legal action, you can hire me to do so and I will do my best for you, even if I do believe you will be severely disappointed in the outcome."

Harry shook his head. "Yet again, truth and justice are denied..."

"Mr Potter, that is why I work so hard at my job," Bones told him. "I want this country to be better. It will not happen overnight, but I will work to make it better a little at a time where I can. Our other meeting is another example of that and I pray you do not lose hope or give up."

Harry nodded. "I understand and no, I won't give up. This is just a setback and it shows me a little more clearly who I can trust and who I can't."

"Albus Dumbledore is not an evil man, Mr Potter. He has his own plans and schemes, as well as good points and bad points. I can tell you that he is heading in the right general direction and I'd rather work with him than against him. However, as you've found, you do have to be careful around him or you will be pushed in the direction he's going instead of where you want to go," Bones warned.

"Thank you for the advice, Director." Harry turned to Tonks. "I already

know Dumbledore will not change anything in regards to where I was raised, so I will follow your advice and let the matter drop, but I will never trust him again unless I can verify it."

"That may be about the best you can do for the moment, Mr Potter. I will start work on executing this will with the various forms required. How about we meet on the twenty-eighth of December to finalize everything?" Tonks asked.

"That will be fine. May I have you do one other thing, Mr Tonks?"

"Certainly, Mr Potter."

"Please create a very simple Will for me. Should I die, please have everything divided evenly between Hermione Granger and Ginny Weasley."

Both girls gasped.

"Should something happen to them at the same time, split the rest between Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sirius Black, except for thirty Sickles to Albus Dumbledore," Harry instructed.

Ted Tonks finished his notes and then looked up at his client with a grin. "I suspect only a Muggle-born would recognize the significance of your last request. Would you like me to add a reference for it?"

"Sure. I couldn't tell you where it comes from, but I do know what it means," Harry said, still looking a little upset.

"It comes from a Muggle religious book called 'The Bible'," Tonks explained. "I'll do this immediately as someone such as yourself should have a Will. Just sign all the copies I owl you tomorrow and send all but one of them back, and keep that in a safe place. You can pay me when we meet again in December. That will be another ten Galleons for something so simple. Oh, I almost forgot. Who do you

want your executors to be? They will receive a copy of your will."

"For now, yourself, Sirius Black, and Professor Flitwick. That should be spread out enough," Harry said, as if thinking out loud.

"Right," Tonks said as he finished writing the names down. "Unless you have anything else for me, I believe we are done for now."

"Thank you for everything, Mr Tonks." Harry stood and held out his hand.

Tonks shook it. "You're welcome, Mr Potter. I'm sorry I could not help you achieve one of your goals, but I prefer to deal in reality as much as possible."

"And I appreciate your advice." Harry turned. "Director Bones, I thank you as well for your advice and help."

"It was my pleasure, Mr Potter," Bones said with a nod. "As to our other meeting, you don't need secrecy oaths. However, please stress the need for secrecy. Based on the looks I see, I believe you'll have a long conversation here, so I'll leave with Ted," she said with a smile.

Harry looked round and saw two anxious girls watching him. "Thank you again." He watched the two adults leave and Hermione put her privacy spell up.

"What happened in the other meeting, Harry?" Hermione excitedly asked. Ginny looked just as excited to know.

Harry explained what happened, the information that was shared, and what they agreed to. He pointed out that Dumbledore again denied him the knowledge he was after, but Croaker said he could help Harry get it. He also explained about needing to learn to defend himself. Hermione liked the sound of that project, as did Ginny. Harry was not sure how they were going to work that into their already busy

schedule -- what with school work, French lessons, and Quidditch -- but they would find a way.

Albus Dumbledore was very deep in thought as he walked back to his office after the meeting with the Ministry personnel and Harry. He hoped he had not been rash to commit himself to the course of working with the others. How far could he really trust them to do the right thing?

In his office, he noticed that Fawkes was not there; he was probably out hunting for food. Dumbledore strode over to his large window and looked out over the grounds.

Trust was the main issue. Could he trust them to do the right thing for Harry and the Wizarding World? Albus considered the prophecy and the road ahead of Harry. There was also the problem with Harry's curse scar. No, he could not fully trust them. They had never had to face a Dark Lord as he had. He knew best and only he could guide Harry so he did not turn Dark.

Bones and Scrimgeour would take care of the legal side. Croaker was the one he was worried about, especially after his offer to Harry. He had no doubt Croaker would take the boy into the Hall of Prophecies and let him listen to the orb. That was something that could not happen yet. Harry needed more time to experience the good of the Wizarding world, especially that which was offered at Hogwarts.

No, he could not let Harry hear the prophecy yet. It could corrupt him and push him down the wrong path. Even Croaker's advice to start training was borderline problematic. Gaining too much power too soon could cause Harry to become too interested in the Dark Arts. He was all but certain that was what had started Tom Riddle down the wrong path. Well, there was one thing he could do about this. He

would take care of it tonight.

((A/N: I never have understood why Dumbledore (in the books) did so much himself, and didn't have a small group working to help him. Sure, he got burned in the first war with a spy, but that can be prevented with an Unbreakable Vow. The one person he did partially trust was a person Harry never did (or really could) trust. It all strikes me as very egotistical on Dumbledore's part.))

Chapter 13 -- Freedom and Love

The next Saturday, the trio went to Professor Lupin's office immediately after breakfast. He ushered them inside. "I thought we'd have a short lesson before we left."

Hermione looked excited; Harry and Ginny were not far behind her.

"Since our lesson on Boggarts in the third year class," he gave Ginny a sympathetic look at her inability to attend, "showed that Harry's fear is a Dementor, I shall have a Boggart on hand for our next private lesson, but for now I want to go over the basics of the Patronus Charm without extra pressure.

"Now, this Charm has no specific wand movement, so most people just use a jab. The incantation is 'Expecto Patronum'. The key to making it work is to hold on to your happiest thought while thinking of a protector; that should drive the spell. Partial success will give you a mist shield, which is helpful for a few seconds. Complete success will produce a corporeal Patronus that is an animal of some sort, and that will provide much better protection. Let me demonstrate..."

Lupin pulled his wand out and concentrated for a split second before he jabbed his wand and cast, "Expecto Patronum." A silvery wolf came out of his wand and walked around the room as if looking for something. A few seconds later, it faded. "As we'll discuss later in the year, that is also the defence against Lethifolds."

"I saw that on the train. I thought it was the ghost of a wolf..."

Lupin grinned. "No, Harry, it was just my Patronus chasing off the Dementor. Now it's your turn. I want each of you to take a moment and think of your happiest memory." He watched them for a moment. It was amusing to see them all scrunch up their faces as they thought about a memory to use. He found it interesting that Ginny was ready first, with Hermione shortly after her. Harry eventually looked happy

and turned to him.

"Very good. Harry, I'd like you to go first. Think very carefully about your happiest memory and cast the spell." Lupin wondered how well he would do.

Harry drew his wand and got ready, a very serious look on his face. He suddenly jabbed his wand forward like a fencer and shouted, "Expecto Patronum!"

Lupin was surprised to see not only mist, but to see the mist coalesce into a big blob before it dissipated. "Excellent, Harry. Rest a moment before you try again. Hermione?" He watched her get ready, then pause as a thought obviously struck.

"Professor, do we choose the animal?"

"No, Hermione, your magic will. You'll find that it's an animal that has meaning to you, although the connection may not be immediately obvious. Please try," he directed her.

"Expecto Patronum!" Mist came out of her wand and created a small blob.

"Also excellent. Ginny, your turn." What were the odds all three could do it, especially since Ginny was a year younger?

The redhead took the same stance as the other two and wore just as fierce a look of determination. "Expecto Patronum!" Not only did Ginny get a small blob, but her blob had something that looked like a tail and miniature appendages that would become four legs.

"Again, excellent work," Lupin praised the girl and she blushed. "Harry, back to you. Try thinking about the thought a little harder, or perhaps pick a different thought. This spell is driven by good emotions."

"Like emotions of love?" Hermione asked.

"That would probably be the strongest good emotion," Lupin agreed.

Harry got ready and stood there for a moment. As peace came over him, he cast, "Expecto Patronum!" This time, his blob was better defined and it had four legs and what looked like would become a long neck. It vanished quickly once Harry stopped the spell.

"Yes," Lupin said excitedly. "Did you think stronger or use a different thought?"

Harry blushed. "A different thought."

"I think that one may do it after more practice. Hermione?" Lupin turned to her.

Hermione seemed to blush for a moment before she cast the spell. Her blob of mist also became more defined.

"Better. I think you have a good thought. Ginny?"

Ginny's face was almost as red as her hair as she cast the spell. Out of her wand came a silvery shape.

Lupin was surprised that hers was the best of them. It was not fully formed, but close. "Almost perfect, Ginny. It looks like your form will be something in the canine family. You only need more practice."

Ginny beamed. "Thanks, Professor!"

What were the odds that all three would do so well, Lupin wondered. It normally took very pleasant and intimate thoughts to do well with this spell, hence only adults could cast it. He also wondered what

Ginny's thought was, based on her expression. He suspected it had something to do with Harry.

"I believe that will conclude our lesson for today," Lupin told them. "You're welcome to practice this on your own, but I would appreciate it if you did it in private and didn't tell anyone about this. I don't plan to cover this in class, except for the seventh years during next term." He received three echoes of "Yes, Professor."

"Again, well done. Now, let's go on a trip." Three happy students bounded after him as he led them out of his office and out of the castle. They walked to the front gates and to the nearby town. Ginny was especially happy because she would not be able to join her friends on normal Hogsmeade trips until next year.

Lupin showed them around, going into shops as they desired. Harry bought a nice quill for each of the girls and sweets for them all. As they came out of Honeydukes, a dark-haired man crossed the street toward them.

"Remus!"

"Sirius!"

The two rushed together and exchanged manly hugs before stepping apart.

"I'm so sorry I doubted you," Lupin quickly confessed.

"And I'm sorry I suspected you of being the spy," Black returned just as sincerely.

They grinned at each other and stepped into another quick hug.

Sirius pulled back and looked over at the three students watching him. "Harry, you could be no other. You look like James with Lily's

eyes."

Harry looked at this man now revealed as his godfather. He had very dark hair that reached his shoulders, but it was definitely brown, unlike Harry's that looked black. The man was also thin, overly thin. He was dressed in nice robes and had a big grin on his face. Harry stepped forward and held out his hand.

Sirius grabbed the hand, then pulled Harry into a hug, which Harry returned. Sirius let go and went down to one knee, putting the top of his head level with Harry's shoulders. "Harry, I'm so sorry I ignored my duty to you when you needed me most. I was truly mad with grief. That does not excuse me, but that is why I wasn't there for you. I can promise you that I'll not do it again."

Harry examined him and found him sincere and trustworthy-looking. He grinned. "OK, but what does a godfather do?"

Sirius gave a barking laugh. "Why, I spoil you rotten, among other things. However, I can see that there is one thing you don't need help with." Sirius grinned and indicated the two girls with a nod.

With a blush, Harry grabbed the two girls by their sleeves and pulled them forward. "These are my best friends: Hermione Granger and Ginny Weasley."

Sirius stood and bowed to each girl. "Miss Granger and Miss Weasley, I'm pleased to make your acquaintance and thank you for looking after my godson for me in my absence."

"It's nice to meet you," Hermione said, giggling. Ginny actually curtsied, although Harry wasn't certain how seriously she meant it, since she was also giggling.

"So, I see you've been shopping a little. How about some Butterbeer and an early lunch on me?" Sirius suggested. Everyone agreed so

he led them to the Three Broomsticks.

When they walked in, Sirius called out, "Rosie!"

A pretty blonde barmaid, slightly older than Sirius, turned at the sound of his voice. "Sirius Black?"

"The one and only," he said jovially. "Can I have your back room, Butterbeers for five, and whatever you have for an early lunch?"

"You may. Go ahead, I'll be there in a minute." She turned back to the customer she had been helping and Sirius led them through a door at the back of the bar into a small room with a table and chairs.

Everyone grabbed a seat and Sirius looked at Harry and his friends. "Harry, how did this happen? It looks like you snagged the two prettiest witches in the school."

All three blushed. "I guess I got lucky."

Hermione shook her head. "It was us who got lucky. In our first year, Harry saved me from a troll in the girls' loo and we've been friends ever since."

Sirius looked at Lupin and grinned. "Being the hero is a nice touch, Harry, but you need to work on making the environment a little more romantic. Most guys don't frequent the ladies' room." The two in question blushed and the other three chuckled. "How about you, Ginny?"

Now Ginny blushed. "Harry saved my life in the Chamber of Secrets at the end of last year. That started the friendship for us."

As Sirius was about to say something, Rosie came in with a big tray. She set down a dozen bottles of Butterbeer and several large platters of food, along with empty plates and cutlery for each person.

"If you need more, call out."

Sirius thanked her. After they were alone again, Sirius turned to Harry and he did not look quite as easy going. "Harry, would it be correct to say that no one has taught you the customs and traditions of our society?"

"No one has specifically," Harry said, "but Hermione and I have been reading books on it and Ginny has been helping to teach us as she can."

"I see. Dumbledore has a lot to answer for," Sirius said with a severe frown.

"He does," Harry agreed. "Sirius, did you have a copy of my parents' Will?"

"I did. Since you ask, I assume it wasn't executed?" Sirius looked concerned.

"No. I'm trying to have that done now." Harry spent a few minutes telling Sirius what had happened and what he was doing with Ted Tonks.

Sirius smiled. "It's a small world, Harry, never forget that. Ted Tonks is married to my cousin Andromeda, your Potions professor." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Hmm, I probably need to do something for her too," he said to himself. "Anyway, I will talk to Ted about the Will. I asked about customs because you have a Life Debt from the Weasleys now. Did you know that?" He glanced at Ginny to see her reaction, but she did not look bothered about it.

Harry nodded. "Yes. This summer, I told Mr Weasley that I would postpone it indefinitely as long as Ginny was happy at home." He hoped he could avoid the topic of their bond.

"I see," Sirius drawled and looked at Lupin, who shrugged slightly. Sirius looked back at Harry. "I've heard that Dumbledore placed you with Lily's sister."

"He did, but during my first year here, I found out that they were not legally my guardians, so I switched to Hermione's parents and it's all legal now. Dumbledore was not happy about it, but I am," Harry said with a grin.

Sirius gave another barking laugh and everyone else chuckled. "Excellent, Harry. Very good indeed. As you can probably guess, Dumbledore is not my favourite person at the moment. If you can figure out what happened to me and straighten it all out, he should have done that when I was first sent to prison."

"Because he sent me to the Dursleys, he's not my favourite person either. He also won't tell me why my parents went into hiding. Do you know why?" Harry looked back and forth between the two men.

"I'm sorry, I don't know," Lupin replied.

"Me neither, other than Voldemort was after them specifically," Sirius added.

"But why was he after them?" Harry persisted.

"Sorry, kiddo. Your father said it was important for them to hide, but he wouldn't tell me why, even when I asked. I assumed it was because they were trying to protect you." Sirius sighed and looked a little depressed. "I really miss them."

Lupin reached over and clapped his hand on Black's shoulder. "They were very special, to all of us."

Sirius looked intently at his friend. "What do you have, two weeks?"

"Thereabouts," Lupin answered cryptically.

"I'll be there for you," Sirius promised fervently.

"I appreciate it. I'll be at the same old place." Sirius nodded in agreement.

Harry wondered why Lupin looked so pleased and what they were talking about.

Sirius suddenly smiled and turned back to Harry. "So, kiddo, tell me all about how you figured out I was innocent. Don't leave out a single detail."

Harry started on the story, but let Hermione and Ginny tell their parts. Both Lupin and Black were very impressed.

At the end, Sirius looked very thoughtful for a moment. "Harry, would you do me a big favour? Just for your godfather?"

"Anything..."

Sirius smiled. "That's a bad thing to say to either Remus or me, but I won't take advantage of you this time." Harry laughed. "I want you to write that story down. Pretend you're writing a history report or an article for the Daily Prophet."

"I'll get Hermione and Ginny to help me, but why?" Harry could not think of a reason for the request.

"Because I think I want to have some fun with it. No big hurry, just sometime in the next week or two. Send me a copy when you have it done," Sirius said mysteriously. He finished the Butterbeer he had been drinking and picked up another. "Now, how about some stories?"

It was late afternoon by the time they left the Three Broomsticks to return to Hogwarts. Harry's sides hurt from laughing so much. He liked Sirius and his stories. Lupin was not too bad either, more distant, but nice. Harry considered that might be because he was presently their teacher.

Sirius had promised he could continue living with the Grangers, but wanted Harry to visit him from time to time. Harry was thrilled, although he was also sad to see the day end and to have to return to the castle.

After the trio left Lupin, Hermione pulled them into an unused classroom. "When we were doing our lesson with Professor Lupin, did either of you feel a slight, uh, pull of some kind when the others were casting their Patronus?"

Harry shook his head, but Ginny nodded. "I did. It wasn't much, but I felt different for a brief second when Harry was the one casting. Not exactly light-headed, but something like that. I'm not sure how to explain it. I felt something it like earlier this summer during the night, but I thought I had dreamt it then."

"Was it about two weeks after the end of the term?" Hermione asked excitedly.

"Maybe," Ginny answered, wrinkling her brow. "I can't remember exactly, but maybe about then."

"What are you getting at, Hermione?" Harry asked.

"We all know we're bonded, magically. So if we have a magical connection, maybe we can also share magic," she theorized.

"I understand why you think that might be true for the Patronus charm, but why did you ask me about this summer?" Ginny wanted to know.

"Because that would have been about the time Harry was doing some big magic, when he said that he pushed his magic as much as he could. I felt a brief pull then too, but I didn't know what it was at the time. What if he was pulling a little bit from us then, too?" Hermione looked at the other two for their reactions.

When no one said anything else, Harry pulled out his wand. Concentrating for a moment on hugs from the girls, he pushed his magic as much as possible and cast, "Expecto Patronum!" He did not hold the blob that came out of his wand for very long.

"I felt something," Hermione said.

"So did I. It was faint, but I felt his spell," Ginny confirmed.

"I did push my magic as much as I could," Harry told them. "I guess you're right, Hermione." He gave her a hug. "Way to go, as usual."

She blushed as she accepted his hug, and then one from Ginny. They all went back to Gryffindor Tower, happy in their togetherness.

On a Monday morning a little over two weeks later, Albus Dumbledore opened the Daily Prophet at breakfast and almost had a heart attack.

Chief Warlock Ignores Justice

A short time ago, newly-appointed Wizengamot member Sirius Black was found to be innocent of wrongdoing, but only after serving twelve years in Azkaban for crimes he did not commit. In an interview, he said, "I will make it my duty to see that every prisoner in Azkaban is there because they should be. If I can be imprisoned when innocent, there may be others."

Mr Black also gave us the complete story of how he was proven innocent.

Albus read the story of searching for the truth, which was just like it was given in his office. He looked up for a moment and found Harry Potter, who was avidly reading the newspaper with his two friends looking over his shoulders. Albus was sure Harry had a hand in this somehow. He returned to the article.

"That's exactly how it happened," Mr Black said. "If a student who wasn't there can find the truth, why couldn't the present Chief Warlock have figured this out when he was involved with it all? I plan to call for an investigation into this. Considering his lack of effort in this case, and that he rarely shows up for Wizengamot meetings, perhaps the Chief Warlock is too busy to serve this august body."

When Minister Fudge was asked his opinion on the matter, he said, "The Chief Warlock is indeed a busy man, being Headmaster and Supreme Mugwump, too. Perhaps it is too much for a man of his age and it's time for a younger man to take leadership there. I shall launch an investigation into this matter and what else the previous administration may have done."

Dumbledore put the newspaper down, his breakfast still untouched. He contemplated on the injustice in this article. In 1981, he had been a regular member of the Wizengamot, not the Chief Warlock. This was a case of the Daily Prophet doing what it enjoyed most: stirring up controversy and ignoring facts so that it could print a more sensational story.

"I assume I'll be in charge of the school for most of the day?" McGonagall asked blandly from his left.

There was little doubt that he would soon no longer be Chief Warlock. However, with some effort, perhaps he could keep his international

connections. "I'm afraid that you will be. I'll be in Geneva for most of the day."

McGonagall raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Very well. Good luck, Albus."

Dumbledore was a bit surprised at her cool treatment of it all.

He was also surprised two days later when, despite his efforts, he was now only the Headmaster of Hogwarts. The Wizengamot had removed him from the Wizengamot completely and the ICW had taken the Supreme Mugwump position from him. He supposed if he were to look on the bright side, he would now have more time to research the Horcrux problem.

On the last Saturday of October, the trio went to visit Professor Lupin again for extra lessons.

"Good morning, everyone," the professor greeted them as he ushered them into his office. "Are you ready for more hard work?" he asked with a grin.

"We are, but we have a question first," Harry said. When Lupin looked at him curiously, he asked, "I was advised to learn to protect myself better and we've made a list of spells that we think would be helpful. Would you please look it over and make any suggestions that you think would be helpful that we've missed?"

"If you'd like." Lupin took the list from Hermione. "Why were you advised to do this?" he asked as he looked over the list, which included some very difficult spells.

"Trouble always seems to find me," Harry explained as if it should be obvious. "Voldemort has come after me twice for sure. There might have been a third time, but he left before he could do much. Some wonder if he will try again, and well," he paused and blushed a little,

"Hermione and Ginny want me to be safe if that happens. I want them to learn too, because I want them to be as safe as I am."

Lupin picked up a quill. "You're better off learning a few spells very well than a larger number with only mediocre skill, so I'm going to put a mark by those you should leave until you've mastered the easier ones. After you've mastered the basics, you should probably also learn the Fortis shield; I'll add that to your list."

"What does it do?" Hermione asked excitedly.

"It is the next step up after the Protego shield. The Protego shield will stop many spells and slow-moving objects. The Fortis shield will stop almost every spell except for the three Unforgivable Curses and it will stop most moving objects. As you would expect, it is also much harder to cast and to keep up so most people never learn it. But if you can, it can literally be a life saver," he told them as he handed the list back. "Now, pull out your wands and show me your Patronuses."

"Ginny was the first to make it work," Harry said with a big grin, causing the red-head to blush.

When they all looked at her, Ginny concentrated for a moment and cast, "Expecto Patronum!" A silvery fox came out of her wand and pranced around the room.

While Harry gave the girl a hug, Lupin said, "I've very impressed, Miss Weasley. I would not have expected a second-year to have learned that. Take ten points for Gryffindor."

Harry looked at his other friend. "Hermione was the second to learn it, after Ginny told her secret for learning it."

"Oh?" The professor looked at the younger girl. "What thought or memory did you use?"

Ginny blushed. "I'd rather not say, but I found out it doesn't have to be a memory. An imagined memory of what might be true one day seems to work, too."

Lupin grinned, easily imagining what she might have been thinking about, especially when she would not look directly at Harry. "I hadn't considered that. That could be an excellent teaching tip. Take five more points for Gryffindor, Miss Weasley. Miss Granger?"

"Yes, Professor." Hermione got ready and cast the charm. A silvery otter came out and seemed to swim around the room. Harry gave the girl a hug for her good work.

"Well done. Take ten points, Miss Granger. Mr Potter?" Lupin looked expectantly at the boy.

"Expecto Patronum!" A silvery stag came out of his wand.

"Prongs!" Lupin breathed as he watched the majestic stag trot around the room.

"Excuse me Professor, what did you say?" Hermione asked as the animal slowly faded away.

"I said 'Prongs'," Lupin said in a more normal voice. "Harry, your father was an Animagus as well and that was his form -- exactly." While Harry beamed, Lupin added, "Take ten points as well, Harry." He shook away the memory of his deceased friend and levitated a cabinet over from the back of the room. "This has a Boggart in it. Let's try the exercise again, Harry first. Afterward, Harry will need to be in front so the Boggart still takes the form of a Dementor, but then you ladies will have to quickly cast your protective charm to save your friend."

Harry got ready. With a flick of Remus's wand, the cabinet was opened and a what looked like a Dementor came out. With a shaking

hand, Harry cast the spell. This time, only a mist shield came out. It held the Dementor back, but just barely.

"Hermione? Cast yours," Lupin ordered hurriedly.

The girl looked scared, but cast her charm. She was back to the misty blob which only pushed the Dementor back a little.

"Ginny, cast yours."

Ginny scrunched up her face in concentration and cast. Her fox came out clearly and easily pushed the Dementor back into the cabinet. Lupin quickly locked the large box.

"Everyone rest and eat some chocolate," he told the trio as he handed out chunks snapped from a bar he had ready. They greedily ate it.

"As you can see," Lupin told them, "it's a lot harder in front of a Dementor, and this wasn't even a real one, which would be stronger still. We'll try again in a few minutes, but let Ginny go first and Harry last."

He watched the three join together in a group hug. He was starting to wonder even more about the dynamics of the trio. It was amusing to watch Ginny whisper something in Harry's ear and for him to blush very red.

They tried again. Ginny's fox was still solid and easily pushed the Dementor back. Hermione tried again and still got a blob. She let it go and looked at Harry, who was grinning at her. Her next try produced her otter. When she let that go, Harry cast and his stag was clearly visible; it pushed the Dementor all the way back into the cabinet.

"Well, I'm thoroughly impressed with all three of you," Lupin

congratulated them. He looked at the clock. "Here, take a little more chocolate with you and go for lunch. I think we're done with this. Next month, I think we'll review this just to be sure you can still do it, and then we can do story time and maybe help with one of the spells on your list."

"Thank you, Professor, you don't know how much this means to us to have this protection," Harry fervently told him.

"I'm happy to help." He held the door open for them and watched them walk out.

As he was about to shut the door, he heard Harry ask, "Would you really do that, Ginny?"

"When we're older, Harry," she answered with a giggle.

Remus Lupin decided it was best he did not know what she had whispered to the boy.

When the term ended, most of the students headed home for the holidays, and the trio were no different. On the train, the trio took one bench in their compartment, while Ron, Neville, and the newest addition to their travelling group, Luna, joined them on the other bench. Ginny had invited the Ravenclaw so she would have a friend in her year.

Ron looked like he was not sure what to make of Luna. She was a quiet girl, but when she talked, she usually said something completely unexpected. Harry found her amusing and ignored anything too strange, much like Ginny did. Hermione was having a harder time with the younger Ravenclaw, but she followed her bond-mates' lead.

On Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, Ginny had to say good-bye. She gave Hermione a long hug. She then gave Harry an equally-long hug and whispered,

"I'll come over the day after Boxing Day." She kissed him on the cheek and then walked sadly over to her family, already missing her bond-mates.

Harry was feeling the same way. He was now used to Ginny being around all the time and he liked it. He looked at Hermione.

She gave him a sad smile. "Yes, I'm a little sad too, but she'll be back with us soon. Come on, we need to go and find our parents."

They both picked up their lightened bags and went out through the portal to the Muggle side. Dan and Emma were there and hugged each of them eagerly.

Dan grabbed both bags and almost fell over when he expected them to be a lot heavier. He gave his daughter a questioning look.

Hermione smiled. "Yes, Dad. As Harry says, it is useful at times."

In the car, Emma turned in her seat as usual. "Well? How was school this term?"

"After the Dementors went away, it was really great," Harry said.

"Yeah, no real problems at all," Hermione added.

"Really?" Emma sounded surprised. Considering what had happened in previous years, she was expecting something to go wrong.

"Really, Mum," Hermione confirmed. "We do have an appointment at the Ministry tomorrow for Harry to talk to someone there about receiving some extra training. Harry's going to meet his solicitor at Gringotts at some point to sign some papers for the Potter family. Oh, and Harry's godfather wants to come over and meet you."

"That would be this Sirius Black person you told us about?"

"Yes, Mum," Harry said. "He wants to meet you and thank you for taking me in. He also wants to talk about me spending some time with him over the summer. He says I need to learn about my family heritage and Wizarding traditions."

Emma looked at her husband and he nodded, fully understanding what she was asking silently. "Perhaps he could do those lessons at our house. We would be interested too, if that's all right with you."

Harry shrugged. "I don't mind."

Emma felt a lot better about her children now. She had read about Sirius Black in the magical newspaper. Now that he had been shown to be innocent, he was in the paper about once a week. There was usually a small article about something he had said or done for the Wizarding world. She wondered if he was trying to increase his popularity to become Minister one day. He seemed like a decent man from what she had read in the newspaper and in her children's letters, although she was a little concerned that he might try to take Harry from them.

"Does he have any other family?" she asked.

"Three cousins that I know of, but he's only on speaking terms with one of them: she's our Potions professor." Harry's voice turned grim. "One of his other two cousins is in Azkaban for life after multiple murders; his other cousin is Lucius Malfoy's wife."

"Malfoy, Malfoy, I've heard that name before..."

"Wasn't that the name of the chap that you believe gave Ginny the diary?" Dan asked.

"Yes, that's him," Hermione said. "Their house was also destroyed

last summer and he went to Azkaban for some illegal items they found in his house."

"Small world then. Harry, why don't you send an owl to your godfather and invite him over for Christmas dinner if he has no other plans," Dan suggested.

"OK," Harry quickly agreed. He looked at Hermione and she was smiling too. They both hoped that their parents liked Sirius.

Dan and Emma were not happy about it, but Harry and Hermione had caught the Knight Bus to the Leaky Cauldron so they could Floo to the Ministry. Their parents had wanted to go too, but Hermione had convinced them that would be a bad idea. The Ministry did not like Muggles just showing up in their building and, indeed, tried to have as little to do with them as possible.

At the Ministry, Croaker met them in the lobby. After taking them through the wand-weighting station, he escorted them to his department. Hermione was impressed with the spinning room of doors and how Croaker knew which door to take.

"I take it Miss Weasley will not be joining us today?" Croaker asked casually.

"No, but I'll tell her about this soon," Harry said.

The senior Unspeakable nodded and led them into a large hall filled with shelves holding little glass orbs. "Welcome to the Hall of Prophecies. I wanted to show you something before we go to my office and talk." He turned down an aisle and led them to a spot that had no orb. He pointed to the label still visible on the shelf.

S.P.T. to A.P.W.B.D.
Dark Lord
And (?)Harry Potter

Harry's name was written with a different hand from the rest.

"Are you trying to say there is a prophecy about Harry?" Hermione asked nervously. "How do you know it's real? Who is S.P.T.? And where did it go if it's not here?"

"Very good questions, Miss Granger. Let's discuss this in my office; it will be safer."

Croaker led them out of the large hall and to his office, which was very cluttered with lots of books. Hermione was visibly restraining herself from trying to look them all over. The man sat behind his desk and waved his guests to a pair of chairs.

"No one can hear us in here now." He sighed. "I'm afraid you have jumped to the correct conclusion, Miss Granger. There is a real prophecy about Mr Potter. The only question in my mind is exactly what it says." Croaker did not look happy to have to say that.

"What do you mean? Surely it's recorded." Hermione watched him carefully, as did Harry.

"The missing orb was the recording, Miss Granger. I'm reasonably sure Dumbledore still has a copy, but as you could see, our copy is now gone. Because of enchantments on the shelves, only those mentioned in the prophecy can remove an orb to listen to it. That prevents anybody else, even such as myself, from removing one after it is placed there," Croaker said.

"Then what happened to it?"

Croaker looked very unhappy. "While I can't prove it, I'm reasonably certain Albus Dumbledore came here and destroyed it so I could not give it to Mr Potter." Harry looked almost as upset as Croaker when he heard that.

"Who is S.P.T? I assume the second set of initials was our Headmaster?" Hermione asked.

"You assume correctly, yes: his full name is Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore." Just for a moment he looked somewhat less solemn. "The prophecy was given to your Headmaster by Sybill Patrice Trelawney, your Divination professor. And before you ask, I have interviewed her and she has no memory of making it, confirming in my mind that it is real. I can also guess at its contents, but knowing the exact wording would be very helpful."

"What do you think it says?" Harry asked nervously.

Croaker looked right at him. "I'm reasonably sure it says that you can defeat the Dark Lord." The other two gasped. "In fact, I'd be willing to bet large sums of money that it says only you can defeat him. Beyond that," Croaker shrugged, "only Dumbledore knows."

Hermione was staring at Harry. "That would explain a lot, starting with your parents."

"And it all comes back to Dumbledore, once again." Harry looked back to Croaker. "Do you know why Dumbledore doesn't want me to know the prophecy?"

"Not really. Based on the conversation you witnessed at Hogwarts, I suspect he would tell you that it's because he's trying to protect you. However, in my experience, these sorts of things always come back to power and control, whether to get more or to deny others."

"And what is your reason for getting involved, Mr Croaker?" Hermione asked, eyeing the man carefully.

His mask slipped again and he smiled slightly. "Excellent question, Miss Granger. When you finish school, I think we should talk about a

career here for you."

"Your reasons, Mr Croaker?" she persisted.

"I have several reasons. First, I enjoy collecting things: knowledge in this case."

"Because knowledge is power?" Harry asked.

Croaker chuckled before he turned serious. "It is indeed. Power over evil, which leads me to reason number two. I want to see Voldemort put down permanently. I don't mind Dark per se, as Dark is in the eye of the beholder; but evil is absolute and wrong, and make no mistake that Voldemort is evil -- very evil. Lastly," he smiled again, "I have a great-nephew who says very good things about you and that makes me want to help you as well. While I'm not related to you, Mr Potter, you should always remember that the Wizarding world is very small."

"Thank you for being honest with me," Harry told him.

"You're welcome. We have a lot to do before Voldemort goes down. For example..." He got up and went over to a picture on the wall, which contained a lady wearing an old purple dress. "Ernestine, I need some mistletoe please."

"Of course, Senior Chief," the lady replied before swinging her portrait outwards to the right, revealing a small door .

Croaker put his hand on the door and they all heard a click. He pulled on the handle and opened the door, placing himself so they could not see what was behind it. When he turned back around, he put a small glass box on his desk. It contained a golden ring mounted with a cracked black stone which held a strange symbol in gold embedded in it. "There is number two and Director Bones has given me a lead on number three."

The two students stared at it. "That was a soul container?" Harry asked.

"It was, until I stabbed it with a goblin-wrought knife coated with Basilisk venom. I got the idea for the venom from you, Mr Potter. I used a goblin knife because they have a way of hardening steel that is the best technique known."

"So, that's two down and how many to go?" Hermione asked.

Croaker put the ring back into his wall safe and closed the door and then the portrait. "I'm afraid I don't have an answer for that, Miss Granger. Dumbledore is working on answering that very question. However, based on Arithmancy and the fact that there are already four parts known, I'd expect the final number of soul containers to be six with Voldemort being the last and seventh part."

Hermione nodded. "Because seven is such a magical number. Mr Croaker, can you answer one more question for us?"

"If I can..."

"How did you know we were bonded? We haven't told anyone." Hermione watched him carefully, but all she got was a smile from the man.

"Despite the fact that Dumbledore is surrounded by thirteen-year-old boys, I believe he's forgotten what it's like to be thirteen. Just a few minutes around my great-nephew, who is near your age, is enough to remind me that an average thirteen-year-old boy doesn't act like you do with girls. If you had been fifteen when we met, I don't think I would have caught it."

Hermione looked at her bond-mate. "I knew it would be something simple we would have overlooked."

"Also, Miss Granger, you should understand that I am a very observant person and I watch for unusual magic as a matter of course for my job. I don't think the average person would figure it out, but for someone such as myself, well ... the way you presented yourselves to us when we first met screamed 'bonded' to me. The only thing that gave me pause was that there were three of you." He grinned. "That's very uncommon, if you're curious, but not unheard of either. If I may, will you tell me how you became bonded?"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other. Harry shrugged.

Hermione turned back to Croaker. "We think we understand the mechanics of what happened, but we don't know why we bonded."

"I see. No rituals or magical oaths?"

"No," Hermione confirmed. "It happened after Harry saved our lives. We understand Life Debts, but we also know that's not what this is."

"Very curious," Croaker said with a thoughtful look. "Well, unless there is anything else you want to ask, I think we are done until next time."

"We have nothing else," Harry told him.

Croaker led them back up towards the lobby. "How is your training going, Mr Potter?"

"Very well, I think. We've got Banishing and Summoning mastered, along with the Stunning spell. We can do the standard Protego shield, and we're working on the Fortis shield."

"Is it working for you?" Croaker asked, somewhat amazed. "That's normally a seventh-year spell."

"I'm doing the best and it's coming up a bit hazy. I think I just need

more work. I've also got the cutting spells down and I think we'll learn the Blasting hex after the shield work, although Hermione wants to learn the Disillusionment charm next," Harry explained.

"Both are very useful. I would advise you to pursue the Blasting hex as it's easier. Also, learning to cast silently is extremely useful. Start with first-year spells when doing that," Croaker told them as they reached the atrium. "Well, here we are. Have a Happy Christmas."

"Thank you for your time, Mr Croaker," Hermione said.

"Yes, thank you. I've appreciated it. If you don't mind me saying so, you're a lot nicer than most of the other Ministry people I've met or read about," Harry told him.

Croaker chuckled. "That's because we have a common goal, Harry. I promise, I can be a right bastard when I have to be. Good-bye you two."

Harry led Hermione back home, retracing in reverse the route they had travelled to the Ministry.

"I like Mr Croaker," Hermione said.

"I do too, although I do have to wonder if he told us everything as well."

"If he didn't, he hid it well."

"I agree," Harry said.

Dan and Emma were sitting in the living room waiting for them anxiously when the teens returned.

At one o'clock on Christmas day, Harry and Hermione took a stroll down the street. Despite the cold, they were not wearing gloves so

they could hold hands. Harry had been a little shy about it at first, but now was glad they were. Holding Hermione's hand was somehow comforting still, without the desperation that had marked the initiation of their bond.

When they reached the corner, a man with dark brown hair stepped out from behind a big tree with his arms open wide. "Happy Christmas, Harry!"

"Happy Christmas, Sirius!" Harry stepped into the hug. When he let go, Hermione moved forward for a greeting and a quick hug of her own.

Harry led his godfather back down the street. "I'll need a hair from you in a moment."

"I understand. However, what I don't understand," he said with a grin, "is why you were holding hands with Hermione. If things are progressing here, does that mean things aren't going well with Ginny?"

Harry had been ready for this. "Not at all. It only means that we're getting a little friendlier. We're all best of friends; we're not dating."

"Uh-huh," Sirius said, sounding like he was not convinced.

Harry stopped and reached up and plucked a hair out of Sirius's head.

"Ouch! That hurt!"

"Serves you right for trying to insinuate things about us," Hermione said and poked her tongue out at him.

"Do you use that tongue with Harry?" Sirius asked mischievously.

Instead of replying, Harry and Hermione each took a step off of the pavement and became hard to see. In fact, when Sirius tried to find them, he found himself looking at the house to side and wondering where the pair had gone to. It took him a moment to figure out what was going on.

"Very nice, you've got a Wizard-Notice-Me-Not ward up." Sirius waited patiently. Suddenly, the street seemed to get a little longer and an extra house became as easy to see as all the rest on the street. Harry and Hermione were standing five feet in front of him waving him in. He walked onto the property and into the house.

Inside, Hermione took his long wool coat, leaving him in a Muggle jacket over a jumper along with casual trousers. "How does it look?" he asked. "Remus said I should fit in with this."

"I'd say you fit in just fine. I'm Dan Granger." Dan, who was dressed similarly, held out his hand as he walked over.

"Sirius Black." He shook Dan's hand.

Hermione's mother walked up at that time. "Welcome to our house, Mr Black. I'm Emma Granger."

"It's nice to meet you," Sirius said as he took her hand and kissed the back of it instead of shaking. "And please call me Sirius. I'd like to hope we'll all be seeing a lot of each other over the coming years."

"And it's Dan and Emma to you. Please come this way. I'd ask if you'd like a drink, but Emma tells me lunch is about to be served." Dan led them all to the dining room. "Sirius, you can have that side. The kids can share on the other side." Dan left to help Emma bring the last bowls of food in before they took the two seats on either end of the long table.

"Sirius, from reading the Daily Prophet, I understand you're on the

Wizengamot. What else do you do? Or does that take all of your time?" Dan asked pleasantly.

"Oh, you read our newspaper?" Sirius asked with surprise as he helped himself to the bowl of potatoes handed to him. He wondered how else he would be surprised here. "You really shouldn't believe everything you read in that rag."

Emma chuckled. "I think the Telegraph is more factual, but even they have their bad moments. Don't worry, we don't believe everything we read in there, but we do like to know what might be going on."

"Excellent ham, Emma." Sirius suited action to words, taking an extra slice.

"Thank you," she said with a smile, passing a bowl of potatoes to Hermione.

"To answer your question, Dan, the Wizengamot does take up most of my time, but that's partially because I let it. I've been spending extra time there trying to straighten out a few problems like Azkaban as well as remove some harmful laws. It's very slow going, but you have to start somewhere."

"Indeed," Dan agreed. "I would assume from what I read that you are fighting an uphill battle?"

"Most of the time. Bringing all of their lunacy into the public eye has been a good start and it's getting easier as I make alliances. I earned a number of useful allies by removing Dumbledore from the Wizengamot," Sirius said candidly.

"I was surprised to see that. I thought that you'd need all the help you could get on the 'good' side," Dan remarked.

"If he had actually been helpful, I wouldn't have led the effort to have

him removed. I found that he kept the position of Chief Warlock but almost never did anything with it. In many ways, that was dragging our side down. I took a gamble that whoever replaced him would not make things worse and I came up lucky. Peter Throckmorton is a neutral and well respected by all. He's also willing to listen before making a decision, which is practically unheard of but very much appreciated."

"Are you planning to run for Minister, Sirius?" Emma asked. "By the number of articles in the newspaper with you in them, we've wondered."

Sirius grinned. "I wouldn't turn it down, but no, I'm not running for Minister next time. As I said earlier, I'm using the publicity to bring the bad things out into the open so we can fix them."

Emma put her knife and fork down and looked right at Sirius. "What are your plans for this summer ... and for Harry?"

Sirius put his cutlery down in turn and wiped his mouth. He noticed that everyone was looking at him intently. "More of this, actually. Once Hogwarts breaks for the summer holidays, I had planned to invite Harry, and the girls if they so choose, to come visit me a few days a week. I thought I might show them how the Wizengamot works. The Potters used to have a seat and Harry can claim it again once he's of age. I also thought I might introduce him to aspects of our world that Hogwarts does not teach. For those like Harry, the school assumes a Wizarding family will teach him our traditions and ways."

"And for those like Hermione?" Emma asked firmly.

A sigh escaped him. "I'm sorry, but the school and the Ministry don't really care, which is why I planned to invite Hermione as well. I suspect Ginny will already know most of it, but I'm sure she will learn at least a few things. And before you ask," Sirius quickly added, "no,

it's not fair."

Emma dropped her head into her hands. "Sometimes I just want to hit something or someone. This 'other world' is just so idiotic."

Sirius noticed that all of the others, even Harry, were nodding in agreement. "If it helps, I'll freely admit that I agree with you at times. Many things we do have a reason, but you have to know the history behind it all before they make any sense. Other things, well, they just are -- like styles of clothes." He touched his jacket. "I find this ... interesting. If I'm honest, it's not better or worse than what I normally wear. But my first reaction is to dislike it just because it's different."

"Perhaps that's part of the problem for us, there are so many things that are different," Dan commented.

"Were I Headmaster," Sirius said, "I would have a course to explain the Wizarding world to those who do not grow up in it. We have a course to teach us about your world, after all." He shrugged. "Maybe I can pursue that next year; I have bigger problems to take care of at the moment."

"And what about Harry?" Emma asked.

"That's really very easy." Sirius looked at his godson and smiled. "Harry, do you like living here and are they good parents for you?"

"I like it here and they saved me and they've been very good to me." Harry grinned widely showing his gratitude to Dan and Emma.

"Then he'll continue to stay here for as long as you want him to and for as long as he's happy." Sirius smile was as big as Harry's, while the three Grangers looked relieved. "I am his godfather and I want to be part of his life. If you want to treat me like a favourite uncle, I'd be thrilled."

"We can do that," Dan said, his smile reaching epic proportions. "Would you like to come into the other room where we can be more comfortable? I can also get you a good brandy."

"I'd be delighted, Dan. Emma, you cook wonderfully," Sirius said as he rose.

"Thank you, and thank you for not trying to take Harry away. We've grown to love him so much," Emma told him with unshed tears in her bright eyes, happy that her greatest fear was not coming true.

"Harry is always welcome at my house, although ... I think Hermione makes him feel a little more welcome here than I would," Sirius teased.

Each of the teens blushed, but they did not deny it either. In the living room, they took a couch and sat very close, although they did not hold hands this time. Harry enjoyed the day with his godfather, and the fact that Sirius was fitting in with the Grangers so well.

Two days later, Ginny joined them and the trio was very happy to be together again. They exchanged gifts then.

Later that evening when it was just the three of them, Ginny put her arms around Harry's neck and gave him a kiss on the lips. It was not very long, but it was barely chaste. "Happy Christmas, Harry." When she let go, she turned him around to Hermione who did the same thing. Harry had to agree that it was a happy Christmas.

The trio also continued to work very hard on their French lessons. Their tutor, Maria, also came by to see them and help out a few times. They were starting to be able to carry on simple conversations. Emma was very pleased with their progress.

During the spring term, school was going well as were their self-taught defence classes. When they got stuck, Professor Lupin

would help them out, but most of the time, they did not need that. By the end of May, all three could cast the Fortis shield and the Blasting hex, Disillusion themselves, and cast the low-powered spells silently. Those spells that took a lot of power still could not be cast silently no matter how hard they tried. Hermione believed they could do all of that only because of their magical connection.

The end of May also brought a new excitement to the school. At lunch, Lavender and Parvati were hyper. When Ron sat down for lunch, Harry asked him, "What's up with them?"

"They think that Trelawney just gave a prophecy. It was just a bunch of mumbo-jumbo, but she was impressive," Ron said as he filled his plate.

"So what happened?" Hermione asked.

Lavender heard the question and moved down to sit next to Hermione. "You'll never believe it, but Professor Trelawney gave a prophecy today. She was teaching just like normal when she suddenly went stiff and started talking in this gravelly voice. It was so cool!" she squealed.

"And?" Harry prompted.

"She said:

The power to Vanquish will be
Found in the love of three.

Then she became normal again, and didn't remember a thing! Isn't it so cool?! Love will conquer all!"

Harry thought it unrealistic that Trelawney would ever be normal. The thought of love conquering anything seemed pretty strange to him too.

"Yes, that's cool, Lavender," Hermione said, hoping she sounded more excited than she really was. She must not have been too off, as Lavender lost none of her excitement as she moved back down to her usual place. Hermione looked at Harry and whispered, "I don't know if it's valid, but that could apply to us."

Harry thought about that for a moment. "You mean Him versus Us?" he whispered back. She nodded. Ginny got his attention with an enquiring look, and he whispered both comments to her. Her expression turned thoughtful.

None of them looked at the head table where the Headmaster was also thinking about Sybill Trelawney's second prophecy and how it worked with the first.

"Harry? Want to go for a walk around the lake?" Hermione asked. "This may be our last time for the year."

He looked around the Great Hall for Ginny and saw her sitting at the Ravenclaw table, talking to her friend Luna. With a shrug he said, "Sure."

The two walked out of the castle. Harry noticed that Ginny was following a little way behind, and Luna was still with her, both still carrying on their conversation.

"I'm still not sure about what classes to take next year," Hermione confided as they started their walk around the lake, taking a path that went up a small hill with cliffs over the lake so they could enjoy the view. "I really want to take them all, but Professor McGonagall says that's not possible as a couple of them are usually at the same time, like Divination and Arithmancy. Apparently, they don't expect anyone to take both of those, it's one or the other."

"I might try to take both," Luna said from behind them as they

reached the top of the small hill.

Harry and Hermione stopped and turned, surprised the blonde could have heard them.

"I've always liked Arithmancy and some say Seers run in my family. My mother may have been one as she caused a bookcase to fly in front of me just before she..." She trailed off sadly.

"It's all right," Ginny said gently, giving her friend a hug.

Luna nodded numbly. "Everything was going fine and there were no troubles as I walked into the room, but she suddenly moved the bookcase and a few seconds later there was an explosion. How could she have known if she wasn't a Seer?"

No one answered her and they all felt sad for their friend.

"Of course, maybe a Snorkack told her, so maybe that's how she got her foreknowledge."

Harry looked at Hermione and raised an eyebrow. They had had a few conversations with Luna during the term and neither was quite sure what to make of her.

"I'm sorry you'll never know," Ginny told her sympathetically. "Come on, let's continue our walk."

Luna turned and looked out over the lake. "It really is pretty up here. It's so easy to ignore what's around you." She turned back towards them and gave a penetrating look at the other three.

Harry shivered from the look and a small ball of fear formed in his stomach at the thought of anyone else figuring out they had a bond. He saw Luna look right at him before she took a step backward as if to continue their journey around the lake, but she was too near the

edge and the ground started to crumble.

Luna's arms started to flail as she tried to keep her balance and not fall off the cliff.

Without thinking, Harry started to lunge forward to grab Luna, but he was suddenly jerked backwards. Before he could panic, he saw Ginny's arm shoot forward and grab a fistful of Luna's robes, right between her small breasts, and pull hard. Luna's head snapped back as her body flew forward and into Ginny's embrace, where the latter held her tightly.

Harry turned to look at Hermione, who had restrained him. She gave him a slight shake of her head and put a finger over his lips before she released him and turned to Luna.

"Are you all right?"

Luna took a few deep breaths before she nodded. "I believe so." She pulled back from Ginny and carefully looked over the edge to the lake thirty feet below, lined with jagged rocks running along the base of the cliff. "Thank you, Ginny. I believe you saved my life."

"I don't think I did. You probably wouldn't have gone over the edge, or if you had, I'm sure you would have cast a Cushioning charm or two," Ginny told her calmly, despite the fact that her chest was heaving.

"But..."

"Don't worry about it, Luna," Ginny assured her. "It's what friends are for. However, I think we should continue our walk and go beyond the cliffs here. Perhaps walking in single file would be best for the moment. After you?"

Luna gave her a strange look before she shrugged and started walking down the path. Ginny followed her after a glance at Harry.

Harry let the other two girls get a little ahead before he turned to Hermione. "Why did you grab me? Luna could have been badly hurt," he whispered.

"Because I saw that Ginny would take care of it and you didn't need to be involved."

"But..."

"Harry, what would have happened if you had saved her?" At his look of sudden comprehension, she nodded. "If she was really about to die, I'd understand. I might be upset, but I'd understand. There was no need for you to be involved in this case. Ginny and I have decided that we will protect you from yourself -- or maybe your magic -- as much as we can."

With a nod, he said, "I understand, and ... thanks."

"You're welcome, although I did have my own selfish reasons for doing that," she said with a quick smirk. "Now let's go, we need to catch up." She hurried after Ginny.

Harry grinned and then started down the path after Hermione. He was glad they looked after him; he did enough stupid things as it was.

When the year ended and they arrived on Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, Ginny bid her bond-mates a tearful good-bye, promising to come and see them in a week. She was going to try to get her father to let her stay with the Grangers for the whole summer after that first week at home.

Both girls were very happy that no emergencies with basilisks or trolls had happened and no other girls had bonded to Harry this year. Between the two of them, they had discussed what might happen and they both hoped it would always be just the two of them for Harry.

Sirius was at the train station and met Harry and Hermione. He explained that he volunteered to come get them and save the Grangers from having to drive down through London traffic. He led them over to the platform's designated Apparation spot. There, he Side-Along Apparated each of them one at a time to the Grangers' home. After a nice dinner for the five of them, Sirius told them he would see them in a few days and Apparated home.

While Emma was happy that nothing bad had happened this year, another part of her was afraid this was the calm before a storm.

((A/N: That's the end of year 3. I've been surprised by the number of people who asked if Luna "can join". That's my answer. :-))

It also explains why Harry will not bond with a large number of girls. His bond-mates will actively work to prevent it, so they don't have to share him as much. Of course, accidents can happen... :))

Chapter 14 -- A Sirius Summer

The Weasley family had finished dinner after picking up five children from Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. At the moment Percy, who had just experienced his last ride on the Hogwarts Express, was clearing the table under the watchful eye of his mother. He was doing the chore with his wand and without saying a word.

Ginny decided that now might be the best time to speak with her father. She walked up to him in the living room having picked a moment when Ron was the only other person there. "Dad, can we talk for a few minutes?"

Her father had just picked up a book about Muggle traditions. He looked at her as she nodded her head in the direction of the door, before glancing at Ron who was setting up the family chess board.

"Certainly, Ginny. I probably should check the orchard while there is a little light left. Would you like to talk while I do that?" he asked her, sounding like it was his idea all along.

"Sure, Dad, that would be fine." She led him to the back door and out of the house.

They both walked slowly along the path towards the orchard. "How was school this year?" he asked casually.

"Much better than last year, but then it would be hard for it to be worse than last year," she said evenly, trying not to shudder.

He nodded to acknowledge her statement. "Any nightmares?"

Ginny was not sure how to answer that. She still had more than she liked, but... "I still get a few, but they're coming less frequently now," she said vaguely, deciding to stick close to the truth. When they reached the orchard, her father did indeed start looking at the trees

while she leaned her back against one. "Dad... Hermione and Harry have invited me to spend the summer with them. May I join them next week?"

He stopped, his hand seemingly frozen to a branch as he was inspecting some small pears. He finally turned and looked at her as she adopted her best neutral-yet-pleasant face. "Next week as in 'Monday, three days from now', or next week as in 'ten days from now'?"

"Either would be fine." Ginny hoped for the first but expected the second, assuming he said yes.

"And by 'spend the summer', how long do you mean exactly?" he asked as he peered very intently at her.

"For the entire summer, although we could all come back here for the last week as we have for the last two summers," she offered as a compromise.

After a moment, he beckoned her a little deeper into the orchard as he looked at another tree, as if making sure the branches would not break when the fruit matured. Her mother hated losing the crop. Besides having fruit to eat, she also made jams and preserves out of the pears and apples they grew.

"Why, Ginny? Surely you're not anticipating difficulty like last summer?" From a distance, it would probably look like he was looking at the tree, but he was watching her curiously as he waited for her answer.

"Dad... Because of my first year, I only really have two genuine friends at school. We've been doing everything together, and coming back here where it's not friends but ... well, Mum and Ron and such. I want to spend the summer with them, and they've invited me over. In fact, I've also been invited for dinner tomorrow evening to plan

what we'd do during the hols. I can bring a note if it will help." She really hoped she did not have to explain about the bond. If she was forced to choose between sharing the knowledge of the bond so she could go and keeping the secret but staying home, she was not sure which she would choose. She would have to talk to Harry and Hermione if that choice came up. Hopefully, it would not come to that.

"And you miss them that much, and none of you need a break from each other?" He sounded surprised.

"Yes, Dad. We enjoy each other's company that much that we don't need to take a break from each other, as you put it." She could not get a read from him yet.

"Besides visiting them, what else would you be doing?"

She wondered if this was a test, but if it was she could not determine what it was about. "The Grangers normally go on a family holiday trip and they've invited me and Sirius Black to go with them."

"I'm afraid not, Ginny, that would be too expensive," he quickly answered.

"Actually, Dad, they're planning on going camping in a nature area. Sirius says he has a tent and he's getting a Portkey for us. So other than food, there really isn't any expense. I have a few Galleons saved up and I'm sure that would easily cover it. I don't eat like Ron does," she pointed out.

Her father chuckled. "No, no ... you don't eat like Ron." He considered the request for nearly a full minute as he looked at another tree. "Still, what would your mother say, you being gone for six of the eight weeks of summer?"

"That's why I'm asking you, Dad," she said impishly.

He grinned back at her. "But it does not do to unnecessarily upset the mother bear by doing things to one of her cubs." He sighed. "We see you so little as it is, Ginny. I enjoy seeing you and talking to you like this."

"I'm sorry, Dad," she said contritely, looking away towards the sunset. They did not have long before the sun would be down and it would be twilight. "I like spending time with you too -- you and the twins." She felt his hand on her shoulder and looked up at him.

"Just me and the twins?"

She slowly nodded, not completely comfortable admitting that, but afraid to lie to him as they were having this conversation. "I suppose Bill and Charlie a little too, although I really don't know them all that well since they are so much older," she hesitantly added. "My first clear memories start around the time I turned five, and Charlie was starting his third year then. I only have about a year of memories of Percy before he left for most of the year for school."

He sighed. "I had so hoped that, as our daughter, you would be close to your mother."

Not able to help it, she slowly shook her head. "Only Ron is close to her, and you too, of course. I'm sorry, Dad, but she doesn't make it easy."

He shook his head and patted her shoulder before he turned away, looking at another tree. "No, she doesn't always make it easy."

Ginny was shocked he had practically admitted to the family's dirty secret, and wondered what he really thought about his wife. He sounded so sad.

"You may go to dinner tomorrow night, but I want to see an invitation for staying the summer and for the travel. I also want to see their

schedule and a list of the travel expenses. I still have some money left over from when we won last summer's Galleon Draw. If I agree to that, you may go stay with them in a week and a half, starting Monday after next, and all three of you have to come back here for the last week of the summer." He turned around and looked at her, still looking very sad.

It was not the schedule she desired, but it was close and he had not argued with her over the request. She gave him a big smile and went over to give him a tight hug. He returned it and rubbed her back. Ginny silently vowed to spend a little extra time with him before she went to the Grangers for the summer.

"Thank you, Daddy," she told him sincerely. She did not call him that very often any more, only when there was a special moment, and this felt like one.

He squeezed her once more and let her go. "I would appreciate you not saying anything about this to your mother just yet. I'll explain ... somehow."

"As you wish..."

"How do you plan to get there? Or do I need to take you?"

"Sirius Black is Harry's godfather and he gave me his Floo address. I can Floo over there at six and he said he'd take me to the Grangers. I think he was planning on Side-Along Apparating me. That was how he took Harry and Hermione home," she explained. "I would imagine I would be back by nine, or ten at the very latest."

He nodded. "That will be fine." He looked at her very intently again, and then shook his head as if getting rid of a thought. Looking up, he saw that the sun was fully below the horizon. "Let's return inside before it becomes completely dark." He guided her back towards the house. "So what electives were you planning to sign up for next

year? Muggle Studies perhaps?"

"I'm planning on Ancient Runes, Care of Magical Creatures, and Muggle Studies. With what Hermione and Harry have been showing me at their house and given that they've promised to tutor me, I think Muggle Studies will be easy," she said with a smile, happy at his answer and to be on a different topic.

"I look forward to seeing your book. I'm most curious to see how it's changed since I took the course. You must also ask about air-o-planes. I'm fascinated at how they fly without magic," he told her, his normal animation starting to return.

"Sure, Dad. Maybe Hermione will have a book on them that she can lend you when she comes over."

"Oh, that would be splendid..."

Ginny was glad it was working out and that her father was back to his normal self. He had definitely surprised her. She wondered if he had ever hinted to any of her brothers that he understood how much of a problem their mother was. When she walked into the house, she hurried to her room to write a letter.

Ginny took the Floo network to Sirius's house where he greeted her more formally than she expected: "Good evening, Miss Weasley."

"Sirius!" she complained. "Since when do you call me Miss Weasley?"

"Since you took the time to make yourself look extra nice this evening."

She blushed.

"I think Harry will appreciate your efforts," he said with a grin.

"I hope so."

"I have no doubt. Now, if you'll hold onto my arm tightly and think of going with me, we shall go and see him." Sirius Apparated them both to the Grangers after Ginny gripped his arm. They both arrived safely to his relief. He was also pleased to see his godson giving Ginny appreciative looks.

"I'm glad you could make it," Harry told her as he gave her a quick hug. "Hi Sirius."

Sirius chuckled. "I'm happy to see you have your priorities right in greeting her first." He hugged his godson before he walked into the house and greeted the three Grangers. Hermione gave Ginny a quick hug also.

Emma guided them all to the dining room. Before they could sit down, Emma handed Ginny a couple of sheets of paper. "Your letter said you needed these?"

Ginny quickly unfolded them. She saw a note requesting her to come over for the summer, a proposed schedule for their trip, and list of expenses. The list of expenses only contained two items: three Galleons for food for three weeks, and whatever she wanted for spending money. She looked up at the woman and smiled. "Thanks!" she said brightly before putting it all in her pocket.

"It's still fairly early, so I thought we might do a bit of shopping immediately after dinner," Sirius spoke as he started dishing food onto his plate.

At Ginny's questioning look, he said, "We all need to get some good hiking boots, and we need to do it soon enough that we can break them in properly, or we'll have very sore feet if we first wear them on our trip."

"Oh, OK," Ginny said. She decided that made sense. "Did you really get a Wizarding tent?"

"I did," Sirius said with a big grin. "It's got three bedrooms and only one bathroom, but it should work for us. Dan and Emma can have one bedroom. Harry and I can share one and you two girls can have the last."

Dan gave him a questioning look. "And all of that really fits into that small package you showed me?"

Sirius laughed.

"Don't forget, Dad, it's magic," Harry said teasingly. Hermione joined him in laughing.

Dan looked sheepish. "All right, you got me there, but I think I'll need to see it before I really believe it."

"We can take a look right after dinner, before we go shopping. It won't take but a moment," Sirius told him.

They spent the next half hour eating and talking about all they would like to do. Emma put the extra food in the fridge and they left the dishes for the moment because of time.

Sirius grabbed a small bundle of canvas about the size of a small chest and easily carried it into the back garden under his arm. He set it in the middle of the lawn and made everyone stand back. Pulling his wand out, he touched the tip of it to a green rune on the top of the bundle and hurriedly stepped back. A few seconds later, the bundle started inflating and unwrapping. Half a minute later, a twelve foot by twelve foot cabin tent stood before them; it even had support ropes and stakes at the corners that snaked out and embedded themselves in the ground.

Dan and Emma stared, speechless.

Harry and Hermione were not much better, even though they had seen a lot of magic. "Totally brilliant," Harry whispered. Hermione and Ginny nodded.

"Well, don't just stand there, go on in." Sirius put a hand on the kids' shoulders and nudged them forward. Ginny led the way and walked in. As Harry and Hermione started to go, Sirius waved Dan and Emma in, bringing up the rear himself.

As the adults stepped in, they almost collided with Harry and Hermione who were frozen to the spot. Sirius was forced to step around Dan and Emma, who seemed to be in more shock than their two children. They were all standing in a living room with a long sofa and two chairs around a low table to the right. There were also some tapestries on the walls and fake lanterns powered by magic for light. On the left side of the room were a table and six chairs. The table was not overly big, so it would be a little tight with all six of them around it.

"This is obviously the living room and dining room. If you'll come with me, I'll show you the kitchen," Sirius said jovially.

"You never mentioned a kitchen," Emma said hesitantly, her shock still not totally worn off.

"One does have to eat when camping." Sirius led them through a doorway to small kitchen with an oven, a sink, and lots of cabinets. "I believe we'll all find the cooking things we might need here, and the cabinets can hold about a month's worth of food for us. Those two cabinets over there will keep food cool or frozen as needed. Dan, Emma, you'll have to let one of us start the stove for you, as it requires a wand, but once it's started, you can cook all you want."

Emma nodded wordlessly. Dan was still blinking slowly.

"Off the living room," Sirius led them back to the main room and over to a wall with doorways, "are the bedrooms and the bathroom. They're pretty typical and have the needed beds and wardrobes. They're not fancy, but they are liveable. Kids, you may want to bring your school trunks." He smiled to himself and nodded in appreciation. "And this is your basic Wizarding tent. I think it will work. How about you?" He looked around.

"I like it," Ginny said.

"It works for me," Harry agreed.

"And me," Hermione said.

Dan was still looking amazed. "This is truly unbelievable. I was so impressed with some of the things I've see Hermione and Harry do around here, but this is just, just..." He looked at his wife.

Emma chuckled. "It is hard to describe. If I ever had to prove magic exists, I wouldn't use the show that Professor McGonagall showed us when she came to tell us that Hermione was a witch. No, I'd use this tent."

Sirius barked a loud laugh. "Thanks, your astonishment is a joy to see. I forget about the wonder of magic, having grown up in it. If you'll all come outside, I'll show you one more thing before we go shopping."

"And we can just leave all of our things in there and not have to carry a heavy backpack?" Dan asked as they walked out.

"That's right, it maintains a constant weight when folded," Sirius confirmed as he pulled his wand back out. Over the door, he touched his wand to two red runes in quick succession. The tent pulled the

stakes out of the ground and started folding itself up. "In case you're wondering, that won't work if someone is in it." About half a minute later, the tent was back to a small canvas bundle that Sirius picked up.

Dan laughed. "I'll even volunteer to carry the tent when we have this." They all laughed. "Let's go get some boots." He led them to their car. It was a tight fit with the six of them, but they did not have to go far.

A little over an hour later, they returned, each with a new pair of boots from a local sporting goods store. They also had picked up rain gear and water bottles for their hiking. Emma volunteered to shop for the food just before they left.

Back at the Grangers' home, the three teens sat in the back garden and talked for a few minutes. When Sirius called, they got up and Ginny gave the other two a long hug. Then because Hermione was standing between them and the house blocking the view of the adults, Ginny gave Harry a quick chaste kiss on the lips. "I'll see you in little over a week," she said sadly as she walked away.

Sirius Apparated them to his house and then Ginny took the Floo back home. She sighed. They would give Hedwig a workout with letters, but she could hardly wait to get back to her bond-mates.

Each of the travellers had a small backpack on and stood around Sirius as he produced the Portkey. It was the fifth of July and they were all eager to be off. Ginny was the most anxious, as she had never been on a holiday like this before. They would not be back until the thirtieth of July.

"Everyone, grab the stick," Sirius directed.

They all grabbed the yard-long branch and Sirius tapped it with his wand. Each feeling a jerk from behind their navel, they were pulled through space.

Just when Harry thought he was about to be sick, they landed in a heap.

"Right on time," a crisp voice with a foreign accent said. A strong arm belonging to a stout man pulled Harry to his feet before helping the others up. The last thing he did was to take the branch and toss it in a bin on the side. "Welcome to Switzerland, Mr Black and company. Here's the map you requested. If you follow the trail, I believe you'll find some lovely hiking ahead of you."

"Thank you. We're looking forward to our stay here."

"I will remind you that you're responsible for being here at four in the afternoon on the thirtieth of July. I would suggest being here half an hour early. Not to be rude, but if you'll head out that door, you can make your way outside." He pointed to a set of double doors. "Our next travellers will be here in a few moments."

"Thank you again," Sirius told the official as he led his group out the indicated doors.

As soon as they stepped outside, Harry stopped in shock. In front of him were mountains even higher than those surrounding Hogwarts. "Wow..."

After they all recovered from the glorious sight in front of them, Sirius checked his map and led them towards the trail and they started their hiking trip.

Everyone plopped into a seat in the living room, mere moments after Sirius set up the tent for the evening.

Harry untied his boots and slowly pulled them off. "Ahh, that feels so

good."

"I'd do that too if I could move," Ginny said, looking as tired as she sounded.

Harry leaned over and pulled her boots off, then he did Hermione's too before he leaned back on the couch. The girls on either side of him leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks," they said in stereo as they leaned against him.

Emma chuckled before she looked at Dan.

Dan groaned. "Harry, you've got to quit being so considerate. You're getting me into trouble." They all laughed at him, even Emma.

"Girls, if you'll come help me start the stove, I'll cook dinner." Emma pushed herself up and headed for the kitchen. The girls followed wearily.

Harry got up and headed back for the door in his stocking feet. Stepping outside, he gazed at the mountains. They were so beautiful, he thought. A moment later, Sirius and Dan joined him.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Dan asked.

"They are indeed," Sirius said quietly. "We have a good spot here, being off the beaten track. I doubt anyone will find us, but I can make sure of that." He pulled his wand out and cast a few spells around.

"What are those for?" Dan asked.

"They are charms to cause people not to notice us, and also to make them want to move along to somewhere else if they should head in this direction. That should give us some privacy," Sirius explained.

They enjoyed the view for a few more minutes before Hermione

called them in.

"Smells good," Harry said as he took his seat.

"You can thank Ginny for that," Emma said, causing the redhead to blush. "She did a good job working the stove and heating the frozen lasagne. I could get used to a stove like this, if only I could work it without a wand."

"Magic is useful," Harry said with a smirk as he started eating. The two girls rolled their eyes at his common saying.

Dan smiled at his son. "Sirius, you mentioned that you'd use some of our time here to teach about Wizarding traditions and customs..."

Sirius nodded as he swallowed. "I did. There are number of things we'll discuss and I'll even try to explain the why behind them. If you understand the why, a lot more of our traditions make sense."

"I think the hardest thing I have trouble with is that the Wizarding world seems stuck in the 1800's," Hermione said.

"In many ways it is," Sirius agreed. "Our world does change and advance, but very slowly. You probably see some of it as quaint, while other parts look nonsensical."

"Why is it so far behind and slow to catch up with the normal world?" Dan asked.

"There are several reasons." Sirius took a drink. "Some of the reason is that we're so separate, we don't try to keep up. Wizard-kind also lives longer, so we're less likely to change. Our smaller population also contributes to that, since we don't have as many people trying to invent new things. Also, many of us, especially the Purebloods, see ourselves as superior with our magic and think there is little need to change, and that was reality centuries ago."

"But many of the things magic can do, we can do with technology," Hermione argued.

"True, I've been impressed by many of the things Dan has shown me lately," Sirius said with a nod to the other man. "You also have to realize that we can't advance in the same way you do in the normal world."

"Why can't we?" Ginny asked, finding this conversation more interesting than she would have initially thought.

"Have you ever seen one of the Muggle-born try to bring an electronic device into Hogwarts?" Sirius asked with a grin.

Hermione turned red. "I tried bringing a battery-powered watch in after Christmas of my first year. It started doing strange things when I walked through the gates and then totally died when I walked into the castle."

"Exactly! That's a perfect example. I remember Lily," Sirius smiled at Harry, "bringing a small radio from home to school. We stood around her in the Gryffindor common room and we all watched it pop and emit a little smoke when she turned it on to show us how it worked. Since those sorts of things can't work in a magic-heavy environment, we can't advance the same way. Your electronic technology doesn't mean anything in the magical world."

Dan looked very thoughtful. "You know, I have noticed some interference on our telly from time to time lately. We didn't used to have that."

"I'm not surprised with all the wards you have around your house, let alone the kids living there during the hols. I wouldn't be surprised to hear you tell me one day that it stopped working sooner than you expected. The magic will make it degrade quicker," Sirius said.

"That's unfortunate," Dan said distastefully.

"Perhaps, but it's better than living without the protection of the wards you live under too," Sirius replied with a grin. "The more protections you have, the more your technology will fail. With enough protections, such as those at Hogwarts, your technology wouldn't work at all. For those who need to use normal technology, such as yourselves, it's a delicate balance to find."

"Is there a way to prevent that interference so that technology will work around magic?" Hermione asked, looking like she was trying to answer her own question.

Sirius chuckled. "If you can come up with one, you'll be very rich, Hermione. Lily had the idea of having a set of runes that would create something like a bubble of 'no-magic'. The magic that used to be in that bubble would be pushed out to form a barrier, and that would keep other magic from getting inside. She used to tell us to imagine a balloon."

"That's very interesting. What else did she say about it?" Hermione asked excitedly.

"Nothing that I can remember," Sirius said with a laugh. "Lily was very good with that sort of thing, much like yourself." Hermione blushed slightly in embarrassment. "If she said anything else, I wouldn't have understood it, as I never took Ancient Runes. To my knowledge, she never made it work."

"What else will you teach us?" Harry asked.

Sirius gave an evil grin. "I also plan to teach you to dance. That will be very important."

Harry grimaced while the girls looked delighted. The adult Grangers

chuckled.

"Actually, I think that would be good for us, too," Emma said, getting a resigned look from her husband.

"There's also the social customs as well, you know: greetings, how to address various people, as well as what to do in different situations. But for now..." Sirius stood and pulled out his wand. He got up from the dining table and moved the living room furniture to the side.

Another flick of his wand started the Wizarding Wireless sitting on a shelf. Putting his wand away, he turned. "Miss Weasley, would you please help me?"

Ginny giggled and rose. She walked over to the middle of the cleared area and stood facing Sirius. He bowed and she curtsied. Then because the song was a slow one, they started to waltz. "Watch my feet, Harry. This is a simple step, it's like I'm moving around a box. My hands holding onto Ginny's hand and waist also give her small clues as to how I'm about to move so she can match me. With a little practice, it's really very easy."

When the song ended, Sirius stopped and gave a short bow. "Thank you, Miss Weasley."

"My pleasure, Mr Black." She gave an abbreviated curtsy.

"Harry, if you'll come join us?" Sirius said. As the boy trudged over, Sirius commented, "Your mother would have loved this." He clapped the boy on the shoulder as he stood before him expectantly. Sirius grinned. "Sorry, Harry, I don't dance that way." He turned Harry around so he was facing Ginny. "Miss Granger?"

Hermione understood and came over to stand in front of Sirius. Sirius helped Hermione into the right stance, while Ginny helped Harry.

"We'll go slowly at first, ignoring the music. Left foot first, Harry," Sirius coached.

It took Harry nearly fifteen minutes and a few smashed toes on Ginny's part, but he did catch on. The smashed toes were not too bad since everyone was in their stocking feet. Sirius then helped Emma while Ginny helped Dan. Harry and Hermione paired during that time.

By the end of the evening, everyone was a little more tired, but jubilant they had learned to dance. The fact that it was late was not a problem. They were not on a schedule and would hike when they wanted.

"What's on the agenda for tomorrow evening?" Hermione asked, just before they went to bed.

"I should probably teach you a few new spells..."

Hermione's grin was infectious. "Like what?"

Sirius chuckled. "Oh, just some easy ones that won't get anyone hurt or draw attention to ourselves out here. There are some tracking spells that I should put on everyone to make sure we don't get lost if we get separated. There's a compass spell too. I thought some simple healing spells, like for healing scratches and cuts, would also be useful. Oh, and your challenge for the summer is the Bubble-Head Charm."

"Why is it a challenge?" Hermione asked, eager for the information.

"Because it's a seventh-year spell, so it will be harder to learn. Still, it can be very useful," Sirius explained. "That's enough for tonight, though."

"Definitely," Emma agreed. "Good-night everyone." They all said

goodnight and went to their respective bedrooms.

By the end of the trip, the teens would amaze Sirius many times. They each learned the Bubble-Head Charm and several other harder charms. Sure, they could not hold the Bubble-Head for more than about five minutes, but the fact that they could even get that far was a surprise to the veteran Marauder. Sirius wished he knew why they were able to do that, especially Ginny. Their magic really should not be mature enough at this point. He had thought he would be stretching them, but they had exceeded his expectations.

The day after they got back from Switzerland, they celebrated Harry's birthday. At Harry's request, the only guests were Ginny, Sirius, and Remus. They had cake and ice cream. Harry received a number of small presents, all of which he liked.

The best presents of all came that evening after the party had ended. Before it was time to go to bed, Ginny and Hermione took Harry upstairs for a few minutes while Dan and Emma were cleaning up downstairs.

Ginny pulled Harry into his room while Hermione went to her room. "Do you want the rest of your present, Harry?" she asked impishly.

"But you already gave me one," he protested lightly.

"I said the rest of it," she said as she stepped very close to him.

"R-rest?" he asked a little nervously, wondering what she was going to do.

"You're fourteen and we're all growing up, Harry." She easily wound her arms up around his neck, stretching only slightly being just a couple of inches shorter than he was. Before he could get away, Ginny threaded her fingers through his hair and tilted his head down slightly while she stretched her neck toward him.

Harry felt her start to kiss him and it was not a chaste kiss either. When he realized she was not going to stop after a few seconds, he decided to enjoy it and put his arms around her. He did not think this would hurt either of them. If he refused, he knew he would hurt her greatly, and well... this was enjoyable to say the least.

When they eventually stopped their snog, they each grinned at the other.

"Brilliant..." "Lovely..."

They chuckled from talking at the same time.

"Thank you, Ginny."

"It was my pleasure, but don't expect those all the time, at least not yet."

Harry thought about it. She was right. They were getting older, but they were not all that old yet. There would be plenty of time for kisses later. As for the "other stuff", seventeen still seemed like a long way off.

"Where did you learn that?"

She gave him a coy smile. "Surely you knew that girls talked about boys in the dorm." At his gob-smacked expression, she giggled lightly. She gave him a quick kiss on the lips before she let go of him and said, "Don't move."

She winked when she walked out and Harry wondered what that was about.

A moment later, he found out as Hermione walked in with a smirk on her lips. Without hesitation, she walked up to Harry, threw her arms

around his neck, and proceeded to kiss him thoroughly as well.

Hermione was his height and not as petite as Ginny. She also kissed differently. Harry tried to do his best to respond to her and make her happy.

When they broke apart, Hermione was sporting a large grin, probably as large as his was.

"Happy birthday, Harry. Sweet dreams..." She gave him a quick kiss and then walked out of his bedroom.

"Merlin!" he quietly swore as he flopped back on his bed.

In another part of the country, a certain wraith was presently feeling very uncomfortable. A young man, who had been found by the wraith two weeks ago -- after his father had been detained at the Ministry for a week -- did not know what to do about his master's groaning. Therefore, he returned to brewing a special bonding potion and wondering where he was going to easily find an infant to steal.

The morning after Harry's birthday, Ginny heard energetic music quietly escaping from somewhere. She did not hear anything from her bond-mates and assumed that Hermione and Harry were still sleeping, so she guessed it must be from Mr or Mrs Granger. She was going to ignore it and try to get another hour of sleep, but she just could not roll over and ignore it as it was coming up through the floor. Giving up on the idea of some more shut-eye time, she got up and put on a T-shirt and some shorts.

Downstairs, the music was a little louder. Listening carefully, she headed towards the back and came up against a closed door. The music was obviously on the other side. Should she go in or not? She did not want to be rude and intrude, but she wondered what was

going on.

"Go in if you want," a deep male voice said, causing her to jump.

Twirling around, she saw Mr Granger smiling at her.

"Sorry, but that was just too fun," Dan said with a smile. "Emma started an exercise kick a few months back and this is her way of losing a few pounds and toning up her muscles ... her words, not mine," he hastily added.

"I, uh, I wouldn't want to disturb her. I was only curious about where the music was coming from," Ginny said shyly. The music changed songs. She tilted her head. "I've never heard it before, but it is kind of catchy."

Dan looked surprised. "That's a classic: Sultans of Swing." He noticed that Ginny showed no recognition of the song title. "I guess the Wizarding world doesn't have the same music either."

Ginny shook her head. "No, we don't. We do have some faster paced songs, but most of them are slower, like what Sirius used to teach everyone to dance to this summer."

"I see. Well, let's introduce you to a few more non-magical things," Dan said with a friendly grin. He reached past her and opened the door. The music was suddenly a lot louder. He ushered her in and closed the door behind them.

Ginny saw Emma doing something like dancing, except that she was stepping up and down on a brightly-coloured step, and she had something in each hand, pumping her arms as she went up on the step and then back down. Apparently, their entrance must have caught her attention, as she looked over.

"Hi Ginny!" Emma called, sounding slightly out of breath. "Want to

join me?"

"What are you doing?" Ginny really was confused. Emma kept going up and down, over and over. Ginny did notice that she was stepping in time with the beat of the song.

"Exercising!" Emma said somewhat loudly, as if she felt like she had to talk a lot louder than the music. "Let me ... finish this song ... then I'll stop ... and we can talk."

Ginny only nodded, while she watched and listened. The song definitely was catchy.

When the song ended, Emma stopped exercising and sort of bounced over to a box on a shelf, where she pushed a button on it and the music stopped. She put her hand weights down next to the music box.

"I think I'll leave you two here and I'll go read the paper while I wait for Harry," Dan casually said before he walked out.

Emma looked at Ginny with a pleasant smile. "I guess the Wizarding world doesn't have exercise programmes?" She got a glass and put some water in it from the tap at the wet bar. She offered it to Ginny, who took it. Emma got another for herself.

"No. We have Quidditch, a sport played on brooms. We may also go hiking or take walks for fun, but that's about it. We have magic to do almost anything we need to do," Ginny explained.

Emma was thoughtful looking. "I've heard Harry mention Quidditch. What if a person gets overweight? How do they lose it? Is there magic for that?"

Ginny considered the question. "Not that I can think of. I know my mother has talked about losing a few pounds before, but I don't

believe she's ever done anything about it."

"I see," Emma said slowly. She thought Molly could stand to lose some weight, but was not sure she should be that direct. "I don't know if you're aware of this, but here in our world, we've found that extra weight can cause problems like diabetes or heart problems, and being severely overweight can even cause joint problems and more. I'm doing this to lose some weight just so I can get back down to my proper dress size and feel better about my figure. For people like yourself, who aren't overweight, exercise can also be used to help build muscles for better endurance and strength."

"That might be nice," Ginny said as she looked at herself, considering how skinny she thought she looked. She was due to turn thirteen in a little over a week and thought her figure still looked like a boy. A chuckle caused her to look up.

"Don't worry, your womanly curves will be here soon enough."

Ginny blushed heavily in embarrassment. "I didn't realize I was that obvious," she muttered.

Emma chuckled again. "I remember thinking the same thing when I was about your age." She looked at Ginny a little more carefully. "Can I ask you about a few things?"

Ginny looked at Emma for a moment and saw a pleasant look of concern. She looked like a loving mother, a look that Ginny rarely saw her mother give her. She shyly nodded.

Emma put a hand on Ginny's shoulder and guided her to a pair of chairs on the side of the home office that Emma used to exercise in. After they had both sat, Emma looked at the girl, a girl who was starting to change into a young woman. "If you don't want to answer any of this, you don't have to. I'm also not trying to embarrass you or take your mother's place, but ... maybe I can help you a little."

"Erm, OK," Ginny said hesitantly, wondering what Emma would ask her, and yet she trusted the woman.

"Has your mother talked to you about 'the change'?" Emma asked gently.

"The ... 'change'?"

"The change that a girl's body makes as she becomes a young woman."

Despite the kind way Emma had asked, Ginny became embarrassed because of the bluntness. She could see a little better why Hermione was like she was. This would have been a hard conversation even with her own mother, but Emma was not her mother -- and yet maybe... She decided to take a chance. "Well, she did talk to me about where babies come from last summer, and uh, well, how to prevent them when married people, err, you know." Ginny was relieved when Emma kept the pleasant expression glued to her face.

"She explained sex and contraceptives?"

Ginny continued to blush furiously as she nodded once. "Yes. There are potions and spells, although she said she wouldn't teach me those until I was about to get married."

"All right." Emma drawled. "I suppose I need to talk to Hermione about this too. It sounds like it may be different for, uh, witches."

"It is," Ginny said with a nod, trying to pretend the conversation was not about her but about some other young witch. "Muggle ways don't work too well for us. Our magic tends to overcome them, or so my mother said."

"That's good to know, although I do hope you wait until you're older to

do that."

"It's best to wait until marriage. If not, then things can get kind of messy. The laws aren't very kind to girls who get pregnant and aren't married," Ginny told her.

Emma was not overly surprised. The Wizarding world seemed to have a very male-dominated view of things, from what she had read and from what Sirius had explained during their camping trip. "The reason I asked is that I couldn't help but noticing that you're starting your change and I wasn't sure your mother had talked to you about it."

The conversation was getting very awkward again. Ginny hoped Mrs Granger was not going to try to give her "The Talk" too.

"Oh no, Ginny, it's a good thing and it's happening right on time," Emma said lovingly, trying to calm the girl. When Ginny looked at her very gratefully, Emma wondered about her home life and her relationship with her mother. She did not think she had ever heard Ginny refer to Molly as "Mum". It was always "my mother".

"You mean..."

"Yes," Emma said with a smile, "you're starting to get your curves. I noticed you're not wearing a bra, and well, it's really about time for you."

Ginny was delighted and whispered, "Finally..."

Emma chuckled and Ginny nervously joined her a moment later.

"You don't have any, do you?"

"No, my mother's never bought me any," Ginny said a little sadly.

"How about we go shopping today, just us girls? I don't have to be back at work until tomorrow, so we can have all day," Emma offered. She had not spent a lot of time with Ginny until this summer's hiking trip. The little redhead was cute in her own way, a real fireball. It was also easy to tell that she would be a powerful witch, as she matched most of the magic Harry and Hermione could do, despite being one year younger than Harry and two years younger than Hermione. Emma had also noticed that she was smart: not quite as smart as Hermione, but about as smart as Harry -- it was hard to say for sure.

"Really?" Ginny's asked, her face lighting up.

"Sure. We can get you some bras and some exercise clothes, if you like. I've tried to get Hermione to join me when she came home from school, but she's not into this."

"What about Harry?" Ginny quickly asked.

Emma had seen that one coming and it was all she could do not to laugh. "Sometimes he'll join me. He gets some of his exercise by being Dan's caddy."

"What's a caddy?" Ginny could not help but ask.

Emma shook her head. "It's a helper for a silly game called golf, but don't tell Dan I said that," she said with laughter in her voice. Ginny giggled. "They do get to walk for three or four hours, so it's not all bad." Emma got up and went to a closet and pulled out another colourful step. "Here, I got this for Hermione in case she wanted to join me. I'll show you how it goes and we can try it for a few minutes, then we can each return to our room, shower, and get ready for the day."

Ginny watched Emma closely to learn a few moves before Emma turned the music back on. Another song came on, something about a crocodile dancing.

"Oh, I like this one," Emma told her, really getting into the music.

Ginny had to admit that while the song did not make complete sense to her, it had a good beat and was fun to dance/exercise to. They did three more songs before calling it quits.

"So, what do you think?" Emma asked, her chest heaving.

"I like it," Ginny answered brightly, wishing her chest would heave the same way Emma's did. "I like the music and, well, the exercise makes me feel good."

"Exactly!" Emma squeezed the girl to her in a hug. "You can be my partner in this. I do it most mornings."

"OK," Ginny quickly agreed.

"Go on up and take a shower and get dressed. I'll wake Hermione and we can have breakfast before we go. I think Dan was talking about playing some golf today, so that will keep the boys busy," Emma said conspiratorially.

Ginny giggled. She liked Emma. As she raced upstairs, she became a little sad. Ginny wished her mother was like Emma.

She grabbed her things and hurried into the bathroom. Locking the door, Ginny peeled her clothes off and stood naked in front of the big mirror. She looked from the front and from the side. She grinned to herself as she noticed that she probably did need a bra -- finally. It would be a few years before Harry saw her this way, but she really hoped Harry liked what he saw when that time came. If exercises could help that, she would do them faithfully.

As the summer at the Grangers was coming to an end and it was almost time to spend the last week and a couple of days at the

Weasleys, Sirius came over for dinner, like he did normally once a week. This evening, Dan had grilled burgers.

"Splendid, Dan," Sirius told him as he wiped his mouth. "I always enjoyed it when Lily fixed these for us."

"The Butterbeers you brought went down very nicely," Dan returned with a smile. "If you don't mind my saying so, you seem reasonably knowledgeable of the normal world, especially since you've classified yourself as being raised as a Pureblood."

Sirius chuckled. "There's a lot I don't know, but Lily made sure I picked up enough to not stick out like a sore thumb in the Muggle world. My other friend, Remus, would be considered a Half-blood, like Harry here, so he contributed to my education. But you're right, I'm not the typical Pureblood."

"What lesson do you have for us tonight?" Hermione asked in the lull of the conversation. Sirius had continued his "teaching" even after the camping trip.

"I thought I'd let all of you ask questions tonight. So..." Sirius looked around.

"Can I go first?" asked Harry.

"Sure, kiddo. What's on your mind?"

With a completely innocent face, Harry asked, "Can you explain about Life Debts?"

Sirius blinked for a moment. "But you..." He looked at each of the girls and saw innocent faces there too. He knew Harry already knew about this, so why would he ask? A glance at Dan and Emma showed curiosity and he suddenly realized that Harry had set him up.

He grinned slowly at his godson. "Are you sure you weren't sorted into Slytherin?"

Still looking completely innocent, Harry replied, "The Sorting Hat did discuss it with me, but I talked him out of it."

"Uh-huh, right." He glanced at Ginny, but the girl was sitting there so calmly and staring at him that it was initially unnerving. "Very well... Life Debts are a tradition in the Wizarding World that state that if you save another's life, and you were not the one to put it into jeopardy, then the person you saved owes you a debt, or a reward, for you risking your life for them. Because it's a tradition and not a law, it can be ignored, but to do so -- especially among Purebloods -- is a social faux pas of the highest order."

"Wait," Dan stopped him. "You mean that if you risk your life to save someone, if they honour this tradition, then they owe you a payment?"

"Generally correct. There are commonly accepted customs to govern this. For example, if Ginny here saves Hermione's life at true risk to her own, Ginny could request something of value in return -- up to ten thousand Galleons, because they're just two ordinary magical people. And assuming Hermione follows the custom, she would make extreme efforts to pay it. Of course, payment doesn't have to be in money, it can be a task performed or something else of value to the rescuer. The reward can be negotiated."

Dan looked concerned and glanced at Harry for a moment.

"As I mentioned," Sirius continued, "there are customs and what I just mentioned was for two normal magical people. If the rescuer or the rescued was someone of more importance, say the heir of a family or the head of a family -- especially a Pureblood family -- then the reward can go up significantly." He looked at his godson. "Harry, name the heir of a Pureblood family at your school."

"Uh, Draco Malfoy."

Sirius laughed. "Excellent example. Were Harry to save the head of the Malfoy family, Lucius Malfoy, the reward would be on the order of one hundred thousand Galleons. For Draco's life as the heir of the family, the boy's father would be obligated to pay fifty thousand Galleons or something else of equal worth. In an extreme case, if the Malfoys had a daughter that would not inherit, Harry could even ask for her and Draco's father would have to hand her over or lose honour among his peers such that he was almost an outcast. Many marriages in the old days came about in this way."

"That's ... that's barbaric!" Emma exclaimed.

"I won't argue with your reaction because I agree with it. I don't see any one person as more important than another, but it's the way our Pureblood world operates. Remember our discussion on the Magical world being stuck in the past? In many ways, we still live under the customs and laws from the days of feudal lords. Consider your own history and what it was like back in the day of, oh ... King James in the early 1600's or maybe even earlier. Those are the sort of traditions and customs that make up most of our current customs and laws." Sirius shrugged. "It's not the best overall, but it's where we are now."

"Harry? You asked that question for a reason, didn't you?" Dan asked.

Harry did his best not to blush or look away. "Yes," he answered quietly.

"You wouldn't do that, would you?" Dan looked worried by what he might hear.

"No, I have no reason to do anything like that for Hermione." Both

Dan and Emma looked very relieved. "You love Hermione and take care of her, wanting what's best for her. In theory, I know I could make that request, but it's pointless. There is no reason for me to, and I also know you don't follow those traditions."

"Then why did you ask the question?" Emma continued her husband's line of questioning.

"Because I wanted you to understand the custom and tradition. I thought you would accept it better if Sirius was the one who explained it." Harry struggled to remain calm, but he did.

"But why do we need to know?" Dan asked in confusion.

Emma suddenly gasped. "This is about Ginny! This is what you talked to Ginny's father about last summer, wasn't it?"

Harry could not help his grim expression or looking down for a moment. When he looked up at his step-mother, his face held determination. "I explained to Mr Weasley that I knew of the Life Debt for saving Ginny's life but that I would postpone calling it in as long as Ginny was treated well."

Sirius sighed and looked resigned as everyone looked at him. "I'm sorry to have to ask this, Ginny, but how do you get along with your family?"

Ginny looked a little embarrassed, but she answered anyway. "My ... my mother and I don't get along very well. She is ... she isn't the best mother to me." Ginny wrung her hands for a moment before looking over to Emma. "I love my father, but I get along with you and see how you treat Hermione and Harry ... and from that, I think of you as a better mother than my own. I don't particularly like being at home. It's not as bad as Harry had growing up, but I would happily accept Harry calling in the Life Debt for me."

"You would want to be his slave? Or could ... would that make you his ... his fiancée?" Emma said slowly, trying to figure it out.

"It would make her part of my family and under my control," Harry answered. "To use the old terms, she would become a vassal of the House of Potter."

"A vassal?" Dan asked.

"The most generic term for someone who looks to a Head of House," Sirius explained. "Basically, Harry becomes responsible for her. She could stay that way and be treated like an extended cousin, or he could even marry her if he wished." He looked intently at Harry, demanding an answer.

"I don't have plans as long as Ginny is treated well at home, but if required, I would call in the Life Debt, or claim her, for her protection. Anything beyond that would not be decided until we're much older." Harry still spoke softly, but he did not back down.

"Why would you do it, Harry?" Emma asked with great concern.

A smile slowly spread on his face. "For the same reason you claimed me, two and half years ago. You didn't use the Magical tradition, but you did claim me for my protection. I know I've thanked you many times and I will continue to do so. I would claim Ginny for the same reason."

"I never really thought of it that way," Dan said as he looked at his wife, "but I can understand that reasoning."

"I won't do it unless I have to," Harry said, "if that helps you feel better."

"But he has good reasons to," Ginny said. "Besides the problems with my mother, I don't really have any close friends at school other

than Harry and Hermione because of what happened in my first year. Wizarding custom works against girls, and my life would be even more difficult if I stayed at home, under the direction of my mother, where she could force me stay there and do almost anything she wanted. I know Harry would treat me right, and well," she shyly looked at Emma, "in many ways, even though we haven't known each other for very long, I feel like you're more of a mother figure to me than my own."

Emma seemed to melt and smiled caringly. "I do think fondly of you, Ginny, not quite like Harry and Hermione, but close."

"Sirius, is this the worst it gets? Is there more we can get hit with?" Dan asked.

A barking laugh split the air for a moment. "You have no idea, Dan. Again, go back five hundred years. Although most British families don't practice them anymore, marriage contracts brokered by parents for their children are still legal. There's a way to legally have multiple wives, too, although the extra wives are called concubines. It's quite rare and usually takes an illegal ritual, but there are also magical bonds that can tie people together, even to the point of sharing thoughts." Sirius shook his head in chagrin. "Magic is both frightfully wonderful and scary in what it can do. As unusual as Life Debts are, it's one of the calmer unusual things that can happen."

"Well, at least there's no need to do this now, right?" Dan asked his son.

"No, Dad. There's no need at the moment and I hope there won't be; I just thought you should know of the possibility in case I needed to protect Ginny."

Both he and Emma looked relieved. "That's good. I don't think I could deal with any more surprises at the moment." Looking at his wife, Dan said, "I think I'm ready to call it a night after that discussion." His

wife nodded. "Sirius, thanks for coming over. I hope our next get together isn't so exciting."

Sirius grinned. "I think I agree. If you don't mind, I'd like to have a quick word with my godson."

"I understand, have a pleasant evening and feel free to leave from the living room." Dan helped his wife up and then went upstairs to their bedroom.

After a moment of looking at Harry thoughtfully, Sirius said, "Please answer me honestly, would you really try to claim Ginny?"

Harry held steady as he answered, "If Ginny needed the protection, I would in a heartbeat. I know it would hurt her father, but I believe he would understand."

"And what about her mother?"

Harry looked at Ginny, who answered, "I don't care."

Sirius did not let up. "But family is special, Ginny."

"I love my father and my brothers and I would keep in contact with them, but I feel like Harry and the Grangers are my true family now," she said seriously.

Sirius sadly nodded. "I understand and I'm sorry. I left home to live with the Potters after my fifth year and considered them more family than my real family. I hope it doesn't come to that for you, but if it does, I'll help Harry look after you."

She gave him a grateful look. "Thank you. I'll even let you be an honorary uncle." She said the last part impishly to break the heavy moment.

Sirius chuckled for a moment and then gave a tilt of the head to her. "Thank you for the honour, Miss Weasley. Well, off to bed all of you, it's time for me to go home." Sirius shooed them off to the appropriate bedrooms and then Apparated home.

He considered that he might need to be more careful in giving the teens the opportunity to ask any question they wanted as he walked to his study. Sirius poured himself a glass of Firewhisky and searched for a book on customs. He felt a great need to refresh his memory on all the nuances of a few. He made himself comfortable in a leather chair and began to read as he sipped his drink.

The next morning started out bright and sunny. Harry got up in a mood that matched the pleasantness that he saw out the window. He quickly got dressed and went downstairs. It was still a little early, so he thought he might make it down before Emma did and he could make breakfast. When he entered the kitchen, he found Dan there drinking his morning tea.

"Morning, Harry," Dan said with a smile. "Why don't you join me on the back patio?" He poured his son a cup of tea and motioned to Harry to join him. On the back patio, the two made themselves comfortable.

Harry puzzled over the situation while he sipped his hot drink.

"Now that it's almost over, have you enjoyed your holiday this summer so far?" Dan asked.

Harry shifted slightly. He was not sure if he should be nervous or not. "I have. We've had a lot of fun, especially our camping trip."

Dan nodded sagely. "What do you think of Sirius, now that you've been able to spend more time with him?" Dan was trying very hard to

be casual about this. He and Emma had been concerned about the man and how he and Harry would get along. Just because they thought everything looked to be turning out all right did not mean Harry thought the same.

"He's been great," Harry said with a grin, feeling relieved at the topic. "I've liked his stories about my parents the best, but even his historical stories have been a lot of fun. I wish our History of Magic class was even half this good."

Dan chuckled. "Well, Sirius is making it all personal and mixing it in with other practical things that you like, so it's not totally fair to your teacher."

"Maybe not, but I have enjoyed it."

Dan thought he probably would not get a better opening than this for his questions. "Harry, about Ginny... Emma and I, well, we're not completely sure how to take it. We understand you wanting to help her out of a difficult home life, but is it really so bad that you'd be willing to take her away from her living parents? Her situation is not the same as yours was."

Harry understood this was the real purpose of their talk and considered how to answer. He wished Hermione was available to help him answer. "Her situation may not be exactly the same, but the things that do happen there ... well, it's close enough to mine in enough ways that Hermione and I agree it's not good at all. I think ... I think the best way to answer would be to ask Ginny what her choice is. We asked her, and like Ginny indicated last night, she wanted me to call in the Debt. You know it's not like I'd ever force her, or Hermione, to do anything, let alone something bad. They're my best friends." He looked up from his tea and saw Dan giving his answer serious thought.

"I suppose that makes me feel a little better about it." Dan thought a

little more before he jumped to the next topic. "What did you think the marriage customs Sirius talked about earlier this summer?"

Harry looked at him a little nervously. "What about them?"

Dan smiled, barely containing his laugh. There was no doubt Harry knew exactly what he meant. "The part about how Wizarding marriages work." He had not anticipated ever having to discuss this with anyone, considering he and Emma had thought Hermione would be their only child.

Harry was silent for a moment and looked back at his tea as he sipped again to give him time to think. "I understood what he said. I don't have any problems with marriage being 'for as long as you both shall live', I think it should be that way anyway. So the fact that magic forces that is OK."

"What are your thoughts on dating, especially in regards to Ginny? You're about to turn fourteen and most young men start about then. I did," Dan told him.

"I don't really know," Harry said after a long pause and little bit of blushing. "I mean, I know I will date one day, but it doesn't really matter much right now. Hermione, Ginny and I have all decided to just be good friends for now. Like Sirius said, we're not adults until we're seventeen, so we'll all wait until we're older to decide about dating. I really don't see that and needing to claim the Life Debt for Ginny as being connected."

Dan watched Harry during his statement. In some ways, he was impressed with Harry's mature statement, yet there was an obvious lack of adult understanding of how his own body's maturation would yield the hormones that would push him toward dating. Harry continued to stare at his tea, having trouble looking up at his "father". Overall, Dan found it amusing and refreshing. He clapped Harry on the shoulder. "I think that will work just fine. You have plenty of time

to deal with girls and I hope the problem with Ginny's family will work itself out. In the meantime, just enjoy yourself, Harry. Is there anything you'd like to do today since you're leaving for the Weasleys' tomorrow?"

Harry smiled and felt relieved when Dan changed the subject. He had danced around the topic of their bond and was glad he had been able to do so without outright lying to Dan. He wondered how much longer they could wait to tell Dan and Emma. It was going to be hard enough considering they had already waited over two years.

((A/N: We finish the summer next chapter and there will be multiple action scenes. Also, year 4 will be longer than the other years as it becomes more A/U and I have to describe/tell more.))

Chapter 15 - The Real Weasleys

The three teens packed their trunks for the rest of the summer and school. They were headed to the Quidditch World Cup today, and then after that to The Burrow for the rest of the summer. The Weasleys would take them all to the train for school.

Harry was quite pleased with the summer. He had had a great time on their hiking holiday. Despite the fact that they had spent a lot of time learning spells, customs, history, dancing, discussion of duelling, and whatever else Sirius could come up with. Almost all of that had been fun. He could see where it would benefit them later, especially the spells. Harry was starting to feel like he could actually protect himself with magic now.

Another highlight had been that he and girls had started a little real kissing. Just as the girls had done for him on his birthday, Harry had snogged Ginny soundly on her birthday week before last, and he was planning on doing the same for Hermione in a month's time.

Besides carrying Dan's clubs in a slightly magically lightened bag and walking on the golf course, Harry had started doing some of the exercises with Emma and Ginny. He only joined them every other day, while they did it every day, but he was certain he was feeling better. Dan had bought him a small weight set which he used on the days he did not exercise with Emma and Ginny. He really liked life overall.

In a room across the hallway, Hermione was also packing. While she was having trouble deciding which books to take and which to leave at home, she was quite happy with the summer too. She felt that she, Ginny, and Harry had grown a lot closer, and more importantly, they had kept their bond hidden. There had been a few close calls, but they had managed to hide their secret. Hermione was starting to become convinced that they would have to tell their parents soon. She was truly dreading that moment, as she feared they might pull

her and Harry out of Hogwarts for sure, if not the entire magical world.

Next door, Ginny was trying to decide how to arrange things in her trunk. She was having trouble fitting everything in. The main reason for that was that Harry had bought her a number of things. Even though it was small, the Wizarding Wireless Radio took up some precious space. Then there were all the clothes he had bought her this summer. Looking to the side she saw the bras and exercise clothes Emma had bought her. She grinned to herself and remembered the pleasant moment when Harry had hugged her and first discovered she was wearing a bra. She felt like she had grown up right there in his arms as he carefully looked down and eyed her chest briefly before he blushed and quickly looked away at being so obvious.

As much as Ginny appreciated all the things that had been purchased for her, she would give them all up in a heartbeat for these wonderful people. She loved her brothers and her father, but here she really felt at home and so loved. That was mostly because of Harry and Hermione, but Dan and Emma, and even Sirius, had all accepted her unconditionally, and she loved them all back.

"Sirius is here!" Emma shouted up the stairs.

Harry closed his trunk, barely managing to latch it. Given how difficult that was getting, he was seriously considering looking for a trunk that was bigger on the inside than on the outside. Maybe that would make a good Christmas present for the girls as well, he thought. As he levitated his trunk after him, he decided to think about it later. The girls fell into line behind him, levitating their trunks too.

"I'm glad everyone is ready. Our Portkey goes off in five minutes," Sirius told the teens.

"Did you really get tickets in the top box?" Harry asked excitedly.

"I sure did, kiddo. I also got the camping site next to Arthur, so we'll see them there. That will also make it easier for you to go home with him," Sirius pointed out.

"Harry?"

Harry turned to Emma and gave her a hug, while Hermione hugged her father.

"Have fun at the match, and behave yourself with Sirius and at the Weasleys," Emma told both of her children.

"I will, Mum," Harry promised as he and Hermione traded parents for new hugs.

"And I'll keep him in line," Hermione teased.

"I'm sure you will," her father said with a chuckle. "Ginny? It's been good to have you here." He clapped his hand lightly on her shoulder.

"You're also welcome back anytime," Emma told her as she gave the redhead a hug. "Exercising is a lot more fun with a partner."

"Thank you so much for having me over," Ginny said, a little emotional. "This has been the best summer of my life."

"And I hope your next one is even better, but you all need to come gather round and grab onto this," Sirius cut in, holding out an old wooden drumstick. The teens each grabbed on with one hand and held onto their magically-lightened trunks with the other. Sirius was wearing his small backpack, which contained their tent.

"Don't forget to write," Emma told them.

Before they could answer, the four felt the jerk of the Portkey and

they were off. A long moment later, they landed in a crowded field.

"Name?" a man holding a long roll of parchment asked in a bored voice.

"Sirius Black."

The bored man checked the name off on his list. "Right on time. Throw your Portkey in the box and hurry that way to your campsite." He pointed behind them. "The next group will be here in less than a minute."

Sirius chucked the old drumstick into a crate of other junk and ushered the teens off. It took them nearly twenty minutes, but they finally found their campsite. The one on their left contained a family Sirius did not know. The site on their right was still empty.

"It looks like we beat your father, Ginny," Sirius said as he pulled his backpack off. "Everyone stand back." Sirius placed the tent in the middle of where it should go and touched his wand to the proper rune. The tent inflated and set itself up.

"I don't think I'll ever get tired of watching that," Harry said with a grin. "It's just so ... brilliant." He pulled his lightened trunk inside the tent and to "his" room. Ron had been invited to stay with them, but Ron had not replied if he would or not. Sirius took one room for himself, leaving the last room for Hermione and Ginny.

Sirius had invited Remus to come, but his friend had declined, citing the fact that a full moon would be coming the next night and it was just too close.

Harry came out of his room and went into the kitchen. He pulled out four Butterbeers from the cold cabinet where Sirius always kept a stock of them. He put three down on the living-room table and then opened his. The others came out and each grabbed a bottle.

"Sirius, while we're waiting, can we start on the next 'big project'?" Harry asked.

"As long as we're in here, I don't think anyone will detect you using magic, there's so much around here. Remind me what the next one was? I think that between you and Hermione talking about different things, I've forgotten." Sirius looked over at Ginny and winked. "Why can't you be more like Ginny? She hasn't asked to learn any special spells." Ginny stood there with a very pleased and proud smile, even if she was going along with Sirius's joke.

Hermione looked indignant while Harry snorted. "Yeah, yeah, tease us all you like, but I know you really like teaching us stuff."

Sirius pulled his wand out and twirled it around in his fingers. "You know me too well," he said with a grin. "Now, what do you want to know?"

"Conjuring, especially things that are useful to block spells," Hermione quickly said.

"Right, I think I do remember that request." Sirius plopped down into a chair. The three teens squeezed onto the sofa. He had noticed they normally did that and almost asked why when there were other chairs, but decided it did not really matter. "You're asking about something that's not normally taught until the spring term of your fifth year."

"I know, but it's so useful," Hermione replied. Harry and Ginny both nodded.

"Well, you've surprised me with the other things you've learned this summer that I didn't think you could do, we might as well try this. McGonagall would be a better teacher, as she does this all the time," he said, trying to talk them out of it.

"We can compare your approach and hers later," Hermione said. The other two nodded, still looking eager.

"Very well. Conjuring is really nothing more than an exceptionally hard exercise in visualizing. The spell is Prodidid and the wand motion looks like this." He slowly did the wand motion as he spoke the trigger word and a fist-sized rock appeared on the table. "The hard part is to correctly visualize what you want. The better you mentally know something, the easier it is to conjure and the more likely you are to get it right. As an extreme example, I could attempt to conjure an automobile. It might have the right shape if you looked at it from a distance, but close inspection would show it to be wrong and it would never run because I don't know what an engine is really like. Does that make sense?"

"Perfectly," Hermione said as she pulled out her wand and sat up straighter. She closed her eyes for a few seconds then cast. "Prodidid!" A greyish lump appeared a few inches above the table and then fell down. When it hit the table, it hit with a splat and turned into a pile of greyish sand. She scowled at the pile of sand. "What happened?"

Harry and Ginny grinned. Like many times this summer, Hermione would jump at trying a new spell and would almost make it work the first time. The failure usually came because she would start before Sirius finished explaining.

Sirius chuckled. "A good first try. I'd say that you didn't visualize it correctly. You must visualize all of it, both inside and outside. That includes texture and composition, even smell if it has one. The details are why this is so hard, besides the fact that it takes a lot of power. Not that any of you have shown a lack of that." Sirius muttered the last part.

"My turn next," Harry announced, before Hermione could try again.

Just as he was about to go, Hermione's pile of sand disappeared.

"That wasn't very long." Hermione sounded disappointed.

"The length of time it stays depends on how much power you apply and your experience, because items that are closest to normal last the longest," he explained. "Harry?"

Harry held his wand in front of him and closed his eyes. He thought that was a very good idea on Hermione's part. He did his best to visualize a black rock. It should be heavy and smooth, the blackness and material going all the way through. He started the spell motion and cast "Prodidi!" as he opened his eyes. A round black rock appeared several inches above the table and fell. When it hit, it split into two halves, each rolling a little until they came to rest.

"An excellent first try, Harry. You're on the right track and need more experience. I'd also suggest you find a real rock and break it open so you can examine it closely. In fact, you should all do that." Sirius looked at the last teen. "Ginny, I don't know if your magic is developed enough, but you can try too, if you like."

Ginny shot him a determined look as she pulled her wand out. She thought about something she had used and handled many times. She cast "Prodidi!" and they saw a drinking glass appear directly on the table.

Sirius was again impressed with the petite redhead. She constantly amazed him. Going last helped, but it was more than that. He supposed she had seen almost every common spell before, growing up in a Wizarding home with six older brothers, and that must have helped too. He reached out and tapped his wand on the glass. It clinked and did not fall apart.

"Spectacular, Ginny!" Harry gave her a tight hug.

"I didn't know a lot about rocks, but I've handled a lot of these. I've also broken a few," she said sheepishly.

"I'm impressed," Sirius told her.

Hermione nodded. With determination, she cast "Prodidi!" and a sheet of paper fluttered to the table.

Sirius reached out and touched it. "It feels very real." He bent it and it acted like real paper. "Very well done, Hermione." The girl smiled and preened.

"My turn again," Harry said. He thought carefully. He still wanted something heavy to block spells. With a grin, it came to him. "Prodidi!" A cast-iron pan appeared and thudded onto the table.

Sirius grabbed it by the handle and lifted then dropped it. It stayed in one piece. "Impressive. You three make me look like a very good teacher," he said with a chuckle. "Either you three are prodigies, or..." He looked at them with a penetrating look. "How do you account for your ability to do all of these spells that you shouldn't be able to do yet?"

They looked at each other, as if they did not have a clue, but they all knew quite well it was the bond. It gave them all more power - temporarily - than they would normally have. They had all felt the slight pull on their magic when one of the others had conjured. They were so used to it, and it was so small, they were able to hide their reaction now.

"I know Hermione is a prodigy," Harry finally said with a grin. "Everyone says she's the smartest witch at Hogwarts."

Sirius chuckled and Harry felt they had dodged this one too. They again got lucky when everyone heard, "Anyone home?" They turned to look to see who it was.

"Dad!" Ginny shouted and ran to him to give him a hug.

Arthur Weasley walked the rest of the way in. Behind him were Ron, Fred, and George.

"Wow, nice place..." Ron said softly as he looked around. When he saw Harry, he grinned. "Hey, mate, I like it here. Are you ready to see some good Quidditch?"

Harry chuckled. Trust Ron to focus on Quidditch first. "I am. Where do you want to stay? I didn't hear back from you."

"Oh, right, sorry about that. Mum kept us busy cleaning the house." Ron shook his head. "With us gone for today and tomorrow, I don't know why. She had plenty of time to do it," he groused. "Anyway, I'll stay here with you."

"Well, that leaves more room for us," Fred proclaimed.

"Definitely, although I do like the idea of a Butterbeer," George said as he spied the empty bottles on the table.

Sirius laughed. "They're in the kitchen. Help yourselves, boys." The three Weasley boys headed for the kitchen while Arthur left to start setting up their tent. Their model did not have the automatic setup or take-down features. Sirius headed out after Arthur to give him a hand.

Ron came back out with a bottle of Butterbeer in hand. "So, what have you been up to?" he asked Harry as he plopped down in a chair.

Harry traded places with Ginny, so he could sit closer to Ron, giving Hermione and Ginny an easier time to talk. "We went hiking in Switzerland and that was lot of fun."

"Did you really go walking for three weeks?" Ron asked incredulously.

"We did and it was great. Sirius told us a lot about Wizarding customs, taught us to dance..."

"Dance? Why would you want to do that?" Ron looked like he had seen a spider.

Ginny glared at her brother. "Because it's a lot of fun." Hermione gave him a disappointed look.

Ron looked back at Harry.

"She's right, Ron. It was a little hard at first, but it was actually fun once I learned how. Ginny is a good teacher," Harry told his friend, causing Ginny to blush.

"You're mental," Ron proclaimed with a distasteful look.

"Don't worry, Harry," Fred said from the doorway, bottle in hand.

"Yeah, he'll grow up one day and understand the advantages." George wiggled his eyebrows.

Ron twisted in his chair to look at his brothers. "What advantages?"

Both boys put their bottles of brew down and walked over. George grabbed Hermione's hand and pulled her up. She squeaked in surprise but Harry could tell she was not unhappy. George then twisted her around to face Fred, and grabbed Ginny's hand, pulling his giggling sister up in turn. The two boys started to dance with the girls, showing more enthusiasm than talent but again Harry could tell his bond-mates were not unhappy.

"Do you not understand, Ronnikins?"

"This allows you to hold a pretty girl and not get slapped."

Everyone but Ron laughed. The twins let the girls go and bowed deeply with elaborate flourishes. The girls simply curtsied and returned to their seats, giggling quietly.

"Mental, all of you," Ron said firmly.

In the top box of the stadium, Harry, the girls, Sirius, and the Weasleys joined the Ministers of England, Ireland, and Bulgaria. Bill, Charlie, and Percy had Apparated to the site only a couple of hours ago. Every seat in the huge stadium was taken and the group was all watching out the front as the game was about to start.

The Irish Leprechaun mascots came out and started throwing gold around. Ron wanted to get some, but Bill grabbed him and held him back. "It's not real, Ron. Leprechaun gold will disappear in a few hours."

"Oh, right, thanks," Ron said sheepishly and sat back down.

Harry looked at Hermione and they smiled at each other. He looked at the oldest Weasley brother, wondering what he was like.

Bill seemed very confident; he was also sporting his long hair in a ponytail and a small dragon fang earring. He had greeted Harry and had been pleasant so far. He barely even glanced at Harry's scar.

Charlie seemed pleasant too. The second brother was stockier and had a couple of burn scars on his arms. He wore his hair very short. Ginny had whispered to Harry that Charlie did that to keep it from being burned by dragons, since he worked on a dragon preserve.

Percy was still an enigma. Despite going to school with him for three

years, Percy greeted Harry formally and respectfully, before turning to talk to his father. If Percy had not looked so much like his dad, Harry would have wondered if he was really a Weasley, but it would have been rude to ask if he was adopted.

The Bulgarian mascots came out: the small pack of Veela danced vigorously, sending the crowd into a frenzy. Ron and the twins started making a move towards the rail to get to them, causing their older brothers and father to have to restrain them.

Harry laughed at their antics. When he turned to see what Hermione and Ginny thought, he was surprised to see the girls smiling at him.

"Thank you, Harry," Hermione said just before she gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

"You'll get more later for that," Ginny whispered before she gave him a peck on the other cheek.

As usual, Hermione was on his left and Ginny on his right. He had no idea what to make of their actions, so he only smiled at each of them. Then realizing what had just happened, he quickly looked over at his friend and was relieved to see that Ron was still avidly watching the Veela. His older brothers had not noticed the quick kisses either.

The game soon began, and Harry enjoyed it immensely. While he spent most of his time talking to Ginny about what was happening, he also tried to include Hermione and Ron from time to time. He cheered with over half the stadium and most of those in the top box when Ireland won, even though Viktor Krum from Bulgaria had caught the Golden Snitch.

They all went back to their tents, laughing and loudly talking about the game, just like everyone else.

Sirius supplied Butterbeer for everyone, then joined Arthur and his

three oldest boys in the Weasley tent. The teens from the twins down partied in Sirius's tent. They told stories and laughed. The twins were especially good at telling stories.

Eventually, Sirius came back and sent the twins to their tent and directed the last four to head to bed.

Harry went into his bedroom and Ron followed. Before Harry could take his clothes off, Hermione called "Hello?" and poked her head in.

"Harry, could you help me for a moment? I was looking at my journal about one of the history stories Sirius told us, and I'm not sure if I wrote it correctly. I wanted to do a little reading before going to sleep. Can you come see if I wrote it correctly?" She looked at him a little shyly.

Knowing something was afoot, but not what, Harry told her, "Sure." He looked at Ron. "Be back in a minute." He followed Hermione back to her room. She hurried him in while Sirius was in the kitchen.

Inside, Hermione shut the door quickly while Ginny grabbed him and threw her arms around his neck and proceeded to kiss him soundly.

When she finally let go, Harry sucked in a deep breath. "Wow! What was that for?"

Hermione grabbed his shoulders and turned him to her. "You were such a good boy by ignoring the Veela that we thought you should be rewarded." Hermione then kissed Harry until he was out of breath again.

"Double wow!"

The girls giggled. "Thanks, Harry," they each said. Hermione opened the door and Ginny pushed him out.

"What happened to you?" Sirius asked.

"Erm, why?" Harry was panicking, wondering how he was going to explain this.

"You looked dazed."

"Oh, yeah, well..." Harry was having to think very quickly. "The girls wanted me to help them move their trunks and the Feather Weight spells had worn off. I think that left me momentarily breathless. 'Night, Sirius." Harry hurried off to his room before Sirius could ask any more questions.

"Everything all right, mate?" Ron asked as Harry closed the door.

"Yeah, sure. They're squared away now." Harry was about to try again to get undressed when he heard shouting in the living room. He quickly opened the door and saw Mr Weasley looking very harried as he spoke to Sirius. The twins were right behind him.

"Please, take them all to the woods down the way and hide in there. Bill, Charlie, Percy and I will try to help the others get away." Arthur Weasley did not even wait for an answer and hurriedly left.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked. He noticed that Hermione and Ginny were at their door too.

"It looks like a group of Death Eaters are trying to ruin things. Is everyone dressed and in shoes?" Sirius looked at all the teens. "Good, everyone out, I'm packing up. Accio backpack!" Sirius grabbed his backpack out of the air and was the last one out. He touched his wand to the "packing" runes and the tent collapsed and turned itself back into the little bundle for storage. Sirius threw it in his little backpack and shrugged it on.

"Wicked!" Ron exclaimed.

"Wands out and everyone follow me. Keep an eye on each other and don't get lost," Sirius sternly commanded as he started to lead them towards the woods through a crowd of people hurrying every which way. "Fred, George, you take the rear and make sure no one gets left behind."

"Why don't we take a Portkey away?" Harry asked.

"Because my return Portkey doesn't go off until tomorrow at eleven and I can't make a Portkey," Sirius replied tersely, looking around and trying to find the easiest path through the crowd and chaos.

It took some effort, but they all made it to the woods a few minutes later. A few others were in the trees too, but they were heading deeper in.

"We should be safe enough here," Sirius said with a hopeful tone, while he continued to try and look in all directions at once for danger.

"What's that?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked at where she was pointing. "It looks like people floating in the air, and they're coming this way."

"Crap!" Sirius looked into the woods, trying to decide how much cover the area really provided.

"They have Death Eater masks too, just like in the pictures, so we'll do it just like we talked about this summer," Harry said.

Sirius's head snapped around to look at his godson.

"Hermione, you take defence when we need it. Ginny is on offence and I'll do both, depending what how we're doing. Everyone do Diffindos or Reductos. Hermione, you cast a Cushioning charm

under those people so they don't get hurt."

"Harry, we have to run!"

"No, Sirius. You told us this summer that if more people had fought back, the last war wouldn't have been so bad. We have to fight back and they're getting close," Harry argued before he turned to the twins. "You guys want to help?"

"Sure."

"Yeah, we've learned those spells and the basic shield too."

"Right, I'll fire the first one to get us started. Everyone duck behind a big tree if they fire a spell at you," Harry told them.

"What about me?" Ron asked.

"Throw the Cutting charm we learned last year or just hide behind that big tree. Be sure to get behind it if any spells are cast at you," Harry told him before he turned to watch the Death Eaters continue to walk their way. Ron nodded acknowledgement nervously. The others found a good-sized tree to take shelter behind.

As the enemy group got closer, Harry counted an even dozen people in Death Eater robes and masks. "Fred, George, take the right side. Hermione, Ginny, take the left. Sirius and I will take the centre. Ron, you take right-centre. That way, we all don't hit the same person."

When they were only about thirty yards away, Harry said, "Now, Hermione," as he stepped out from behind his tree and fired a strong cutting curse towards one of the Death Eaters that was levitating their victim nearly fifty feet in the air. The other Death Eaters did not see the spell as they were looking in the other direction and firing randomly towards all the tents.

Harry's cutting spell took the man's wand arm off and the person the Death Eater was levitating started to drop. He fired one more cutting curse at another person levitating a Muggle and then quickly cast a cushioning charm to help Hermione out.

The others had cast their spells and it looked like half of the Death Eaters were on the ground. Ginny had hit the last Death Eater still levitating a person and all the victims were out of the air and safely lying on the ground.

As Harry's team started yet another barrage, the Death Eaters figured out where the spells were coming from and they all fired a Killing Curse. Harry saw one coming his way and ducked behind his tree. There was a small explosion and his tree shook, wood splinters flying to the sides. A quick glance showed Ron huddled and hiding behind his tree. Harry turned the other direction and, still squatting, fired a Reducto back. He did not get to see if he hit anyone, as more spells were flying his way. They missed his tree, fortunately.

Harry turned back to the other side and fired another Reducto. Sirius and Ginny were casting too. The three hexes hit the Death Eaters, causing them to go flying through the air. At the same time, red spells came from the other direction and hit the last two Death Eaters standing, dropping them.

"Crap! Crap! Crap!" Sirius exclaimed as he dug in his robes. He finally pulled out a length of rope. "Everyone come here and grab this, quick!" They all ran over, stumbling slightly in their haste; Ron was the shakiest.

"I thought you said you couldn't make a Portkey," Harry said as he grabbed hold.

"I can't, but if you're desperate enough and lucky enough, you can alter the time of an existing Portkey." Sirius was waving his wand over the rope and it suddenly turned blue. He was relieved to feel the

jerk and the spinning that a working Portkey made. When the group landed in his living room and he saw they had all made it, he was even more relieved. The fact that he was lying on the floor instead of standing was of no consequence.

Ginny had landed half on top of Harry. She smirked impishly at him as she very slowly got up. He blushed deeply. It did not help that Hermione had landed so that their legs were tangled and essentially preventing him from moving. The others were piled haphazardly around the room from their landing.

"Now that was fun!" George said with a grin.

"Very! I love your parties, Harry."

"Do invite us to the next one."

"We shall be most put out if you don't."

"Do you realize how much trouble we could have been in if we were caught?" Sirius croaked, still lying on the floor and staring at the ceiling, very relieved they had all safely gotten away.

"Sirius, we were helping the Aurors until they could get there. Those Death Eaters must have broken several laws, and that doesn't include the use of the Unforgivables," Harry replied.

"Trust me, Harry. It's far better that no one knows that was us." Sirius propped himself up on one elbow. "That goes for everyone here. This is our secret. We don't tell anyone: brothers, parents, friends, no one. Understand?"

"Yes, Sirius!" they chorused.

"If anyone asks, we ran into the woods as Arthur asked. We heard spells being cast, so for safety, I pulled out my Portkey and we all

came home. Can everyone remember this?" Sirius looked around sternly, trying to impress upon everyone what could and could not be said.

"That's a very creative view of the facts," Hermione said with a slightly amused look.

"But none of it is untrue," Ginny pointed out. "They just don't need to know the other parts."

Sirius cleared his throat as the twins looked like they wanted to add their two Knuts worth. "Are we all agreed on what happened?"

"Yes, Sirius!" was chorused to him to him again.

"Thank you. Now, I have to Floo call Molly so she'll know I have you here safely. Dan and Emma should know too. Damn! How am I going to tell Arthur? He'll be sick with worry when he can't find us." Sirius was shaking his head.

"I have an idea," Hermione said very quietly.

"Please!"

"After you tell Mrs Weasley, Apparate back to where our tent was and wait for Mr Weasley or his sons. My parents can wait until tomorrow as they won't know there's any problem. We'll all promise to stay here and out of trouble." Hermione gave a nervous smile.

Sirius blinked a moment and then smiled. "Brilliant, but we need one change." Sirius thrust his backpack to Harry. "Take this since it has all of your things in it and all of you Floo to The Burrow now. I'll go find Arthur and then come get the tent sometime later. I'll tell Dan and Emma first thing in the morning."

The teens grumbled at not being allowed to stay alone, but they

obeyed. As soon as the six of them were through, Sirius went as well and explained the situation to Molly. She was beside herself with worry, having heard of the commotion on the Wireless, so she enthusiastically greeted each child.

That done, Sirius took a moment and Apparated to the Grangers to give them a quick update, for which they were thankful. He then Apparated back to his campsite now that he knew where it was. Percy was there and they quickly found Arthur.

"Sirius, where are the children?"

"They're safely at The Burrow," Sirius quickly told the father, who breathed a deep sigh of relief. "I, uh, I forced my Portkey to take us back to my house and then I sent them all to your house."

"Thank you so much, Sirius! There was a fight near the woods with the Death Eaters, so I was afraid you had been caught in that when we couldn't find you."

Sirius used his Marauder skills to smile and put the man at ease. "We must have been in a different part of the woods. They really are all safe with Molly."

"Thank Merlin!" Arthur gave him another thankful look. "The spells used were so powerful I don't think many of those Death Eaters got away. Some probably won't survive either."

Sirius nodded in concern, while wondering what the outcome of this was going to be and if they would eventually get caught.

"Gosse, report." Rufus Scrimgeour barked.

Frank Gosse turned to his superior. "Jones and Li were the first on the scene. Eye-witnesses say a group of about a dozen Death Eaters were floating the four Muggles who own this area in the air

and making sport of them. As they got to this location, spells came out of the woods over there. There was a small fight with these bastards casting the Killing Curse. Jones and Li saw it from a distance. By the time they got here and cast their own Stunners, another set of hexes hit the remaining Death Eaters and it was over."

Scrimgeour looked around the scene. "Why are they still floating?" he asked while pointing at the Muggles who were lying about a foot off the ground.

"The Death Eaters had them about fifty feet in the air, we were told. Now, they're just lying on a Cushioning charm. Whoever it was in the woods did try to protect them when they fell. They aren't very badly hurt, so we put them to sleep until we have time to deal with them," Gosse explained.

"What about them?" Scrimgeour asked, pointing at the Death Eaters. "You said a dozen and I only see nine."

"Li said three of them were hit at the end with the Blasting hex, but they had shields up so they were just knocked back on their arse. Apparently, despite the shaking they were given, they still had enough sense to activate a Portkey."

Scrimgeour looked at an Auror who was taking photos of the scene. There were also a few Healers here, but they were only tending to two Death Eaters. "So the other nine will stand trial?"

"Uh, no sir. Only four will stand trial. The other five will have to be buried. They all died from blood loss," Gosse said.

Scrimgeour walked over and started looking at the corpses. "High-powered cutting curses. I don't think most Aurors could do this," he groused.

"No sir. I can think of only a few handfuls who could."

The head Auror looked around a moment more in silence. "Did you find who was in the woods?"

"No sir. They were long gone by the time we got there. Jones thinks they probably took a Portkey as well. I'd guess it's someone who lost family in the first war and wanted some revenge. Li said he thinks it was five or six people and one of them seemed to be able to cast with two wands simultaneously." Gosse paused for a brief moment. "May I say something, sir."

Scrimgeour grunted.

"Sir, these are Death Eaters," Gosse said quietly so only the two men could hear. "Every one of them has a Dark Mark on their arm. They were torturing Muggles. They were firing some fairly nasty Dark curses into a crowd of people and into tents that had people in them. They fired Unforgivables on people. I don't know that I want to go find out who was in the woods. We can easily put this scum away for so long they'll never leave Azkaban alive. If I found out whoever was in the woods, I'd prefer to thank them for doing our job such that none of us got hurt, not put them on trial."

Before more could be said, an Apparation crack sounded a short distance away. Everyone saw a very upset-looking Amelia Bones, Director for Magical Law Enforcement, walk their way.

"Scrimgeour, Gosse, what do we have?" Bones looked at her direct subordinate, so Scrimgeour started talking, repeating what Gosse had told him. When he was done, Bones looked around herself and then walked over to the wooded area the spells had come from, the two Aurors following her. She looked around and made sure no one else was nearby.

"Gentlemen, if any evidence is found on who was here, it comes to my desk and I will deal it properly and carefully. At the moment, we

have what appears to be a happy ending to a tragic event." She stared at each of them for a moment. "It will stay that way if at all legally possible. I don't need to explain the pressure Fudge will bring to bear on us otherwise, do I?"

"No, Director. We understand perfectly," Scrimgeour said dutifully.

"Take a Pepperup if you need it, but I want your reports on my desk when I get in first thing in the morning. Rufus, you're authorized to release the information that we have captured nine Death Eaters breaking the law, including the use of Unforgivables." She turned to the other man. "Gosse, you and your team will remain silent on this."

"Yes, Director, no speaking to reporters."

Bones nodded and Apparated away.

"Looks like you'll get your wish, Frank."

"Yes, sir. A happy ending indeed." Gosse returned to talk to his team with a spring in his step. There would be no "I was under the Imperius Curse" excuses this time because there was no Dark Lord to do it.

The next morning started a long day for Harry. He got up a little later than usual, but then again, he had stayed up very late the night before and yesterday had been a very long and energetic day. A part of him had trouble believing he had battled Death Eaters last night.

He got dressed and went out into the living room of the tent. They had stayed in it when Mrs Weasley told everyone to go to bed, but she had not really said where. Since their things were in the tent, Harry had decided they would stay in it.

Hermione was already up and waiting. She also looked as bleary-eyed as he felt.

"Where's Ginny?"

"She's getting dressed. She'll be out in a minute." Hermione looked pensive and answered with little thought.

"What's wrong?" He sat down beside her.

Uncharacteristically for her, she leaned into him. "I was - I was thinking about last night."

"Yeah, I can hardly believe we did that."

"Harry? I ... I know I hurt some people badly and I might have even killed one of them." She buried her head into his chest.

He wrapped her in his arms and patted her gently on the back. "You took care of the abused Muggles, Hermione. You didn't get many offensive spells off."

"I know I hit one with a cutting spell, and I'm sure I got one with a blasting spell at the end," she said with disagreement in her voice.

"The ones hit with the blasting spell at the end had a shield up, so they survived," Harry corrected her.

"But the other one..."

"Might still have lived," he said firmly.

"Hermione," Ginny's voice sounded from across the room, "you did what you had to do to protect people, and you did it to ... to animals ... who didn't care if they killed people or not. Half of them cast the Killing Curse at us, Hermione."

"But we shot first," the brunette insisted.

"Actually, they did," Harry said calmly. "They cast the first spell at the Muggles, and they were casting spells into the crowd of campers. We were defending the crowd and rescuing the Muggles. I know your conscience doesn't like what we had to do, and part of me didn't like doing it either, but Ginny's right. It had to be done and there was no one else willing to stand up to them and do it."

Hermione breathed a heavy sigh. "My brain tells me you're right, but my heart doesn't like it."

"And that's what makes you a good person, Hermione. If you liked hurting people, you'd be a Death Eater," Ginny told her.

"What about you, Ginny?"

Ginny looked her female bond-mate straight in the eye. "Like Harry, a large part of me didn't like doing that, but I knew it had to be done so I did it. I know what Tom Riddle is capable of and how he would use Death Eaters. We have to take as many of them out of the picture as possible."

"I still don't like it."

"But I know you won't give up either, and I like that about you," Harry said with a smile.

It was weak, but Hermione gave him a smile back.

"Come on, let's go and eat," Ginny said and led the trio out of the tent.

As they emerged into the daylight, Bill and Charlie were coming out of the house. Each of the brothers drew Ginny into a hug.

"I'm glad you made it out all right," Bill told her as he ran his hand

over her head, holding it lovingly.

"Thanks, us too. Are you leaving?" she asked.

"Yeah, it's time for us to go. Will you be all right?" Charlie asked her.

"Sure, I've got Harry and Hermione to help me," Ginny said with an impish grin. "We watch each other's backs."

Charlie gave her a hug too. "Well, you take care. You might even see us later this year, you never know," he told her with a wink.

Everyone shouted "Bye!" at the same time before the two brothers Apparated away.

Ginny led them into the house. As they got into the dining room, Ginny's mother practically stomped into the room, a stormy look on her face. "Where have you been? I've been looking all over the house for you three! If your hand on the family clock hadn't pointed to 'Home', I would have made your father come back."

Harry's eyes went wide, not expecting to be yelled at. Hermione moved a little closer to him. Ginny, used to this treatment, stood there impassively. "We spent the night in Sirius's tent."

"What on earth for? You have perfectly good beds upstairs," Molly fumed loudly.

"Because our clothes and things were in the tent. And actually, the beds in the tent are more comfortable," Harry told her, causing her to turn her glare on him. "You and Mr Weasley are welcome to try the one in the extra bedroom that Sirius uses."

She ignored the invitation. "You must sleep in the house. It's not proper for you to be out there unsupervised."

"Mum, we can't really do anything improper out there. Hermione and I share a bedroom and Harry has his own," Ginny explained.

"It is still not proper. I want you move your things into the bedrooms upstairs immediately after breakfast," she huffed. "Ginny, come get the food." Turning on her heel, she stormed back to the kitchen.

Ginny mouthed, "Sorry," as she followed her mother out of the room.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, a grim expression on each of their faces.

They had just sat down when an owl flew in the open window and landed in front of Hermione. Expecting this, she pulled a Knut out of her pocket, put it into the bird's pouch and pulled off her copy of the Daily Prophet, allowing the bird to leave. She read the headline and gasped just as Ginny and her mother returned.

"It says that five Death Eaters were killed last night and four others were captured. Plus..." Hermione's voice stopped as the newspaper was pulled out of her hands.

"I'm sorry, Hermione, but Arthur shouldn't have left his newspaper laying here. I'll take it and put it away," Molly said quickly and firmly.

"Mrs Weasley, that was my newspaper."

"What?" Molly looked surprised. "No, I'm sure it's Arthur's. You don't have a need to be reading something as horrid as this."

"Mrs Weasley," Hermione said a little louder. "Not only did I pay for that, but my parents request that I read it to know what's going on in the world, even though we all know that what they print is not entirely truthful."

Molly looked at the girl as if she did not believe her.

"It's true, Mrs Weasley," Harry said. "Hermione did pay for the paper moments before you walked in, and our parents do want us to read it."

"But, but you don't really need to read this one. It's not fit for someone your age," the woman insisted. "Eat your breakfast instead." She turned and started to leave the room, Hermione's newspaper still in her hand.

Harry whipped out his wand and silently summoned the newspaper. He reached out and grabbed it as Mrs Weasley spun around. As he handed it to Hermione, he told her, "I'm sorry, Mrs Weasley, but there is no real danger in reading a newspaper and you don't have the right to take Hermione's newspaper. If you are deeply offended, we can leave and go back home." He stared at her, doing his best to keep a neutral face, despite the fact that he was quite angry at the woman. Harry again wondered how Ginny had survived growing up here. This woman seemed as bad as his Aunt Petunia, though in a different way.

Molly's eyes narrowed, but Harry held his neutral look firm.

Before anything else could be said, Ron wearily stumbled into the room. "What's all the shouting for?" he asked as he dropped into a chair at the table.

His mother gave a small snort before spinning and leaving the room, anger in each step.

"So?" Ron asked just before he yawned.

"Mum didn't like it that we slept in the tent. She also didn't like it that Hermione has a Daily Prophet," Ginny informed him as she started dishing out food and then handing the bowl to Harry.

Ron shrugged and grabbed the plate of bacon before it could be snagged by someone else.

Harry looked at Hermione. "So, what else is in there?"

While they ate, Hermione summarized most of what she read, although she did quote a few choice parts.

Ron started to comment on what happened, so Ginny shook her head. "Secret," she whispered and then pointed towards the kitchen. Ron looked blankly for a moment before he cottoned on and nodded. He finished his breakfast and went back to his room.

The trio went out to the back garden and pulled their things out of the tent. When they were done, Harry made the tent fold itself.

"Ginny? Did you notice that your mother didn't comment on my using magic to get the newspaper from her?"

The redhead looked at him for a moment before she started chuckling. "No, I didn't, but I think she was too angry to notice. She may say something later, so be ready." Ginny sighed. "I'm sorry, you two. I know that wasn't pleasant."

Harry sighed and looked guilty. "Ginny, I'm sorry, but I don't want to, uh, ..."

"I know, I know. Dad won't be happy, but I think he'll understand that I don't want to come back next summer." Ginny looked at the other two. "We'll work something out."

"Yes we will," Harry said with conviction. "I think we need to tell them something at the beginning of next summer. I'll claim you if I have to."

"That won't be easy, even with preparing our parents, Harry," Hermione told him. "I can only imagine what it will be like here."

Ginny winced at the thought. "I know it's the wimpy way, but I'll suggest telling Dad on his own and letting him tell Mum."

Harry grinned at her. "That's not a very Gryffindor thing to do."

"Maybe not, but I can see the merit in it," Hermione said.

Harry grabbed the small bundle of tent on the ground and his lightened trunk and headed towards the house.

"I think I'll do a quick workout," Ginny told them.

"In that case, I think I'll take a shower and get ready first," Hermione said.

"Right, and I'll take a shower after you, and Ginny can go after her workout."

"You're not going to join me and workout, Harry?" Ginny asked.

"Not today, probably tomorrow though," he replied.

They all went to the appropriate bedroom. Ron was now dressed and sitting in bed while leaning against the wall. He had a Quidditch magazine in hand; he looked like he was planning to spend the entire morning right there.

Harry pulled out some clothes to change into after he showered. He was starting to look around to see what else he needed to do when he heard stomping coming from the stairs below. A glance at Ron showed his friend to be ignoring it all, apparently used to it. Harry went to the doorway to try to figure out what was going on now.

Suddenly, he heard music playing, a tune with a fast beat. Ginny had already started her workout. He had not heard the radio, so he

assumed she had silenced the door. He was not sure what had gone wrong.

"Shut that thing off!" Her mother yelled.

Harry made it to the stairs as the music cut off. He listened more closely now to the argument from the floor below.

"What are you doing stomping on the floor and playing that music so loudly! And where did you get that thing anyway?" her mother demanded.

Ginny must not have silenced the floor, or so Harry guessed.

"I was only exercising, Mum..."

"In that tarty outfit? Shameful! It's a good thing your father is at work this morning and not here to see that. Quit jumping on the ceiling, take that outfit off and give it to me, and act like a proper young lady." Mrs Weasley sounded doubtful that could be done.

Apparently, Mrs Weasley did not like Ginny in a spandex exercise outfit. Harry thought it was fine on her and did not really show all that much. In a couple of years, on the other hand, he thought it might be very interesting to see Ginny in an outfit like that.

"Mum! Exercising is good for you. It helps you to grow up and build muscles," Ginny retorted. "Plus it makes me feel good."

"I don't care, no one else does it."

"Harry does it sometimes."

Harry closed his eyes and shook his head. That was the wrong thing to say and he braced himself against the stair rail.

"What? He's seen you dressed like that? Shameful! Give me those ... those things so I can bin them."

"Mum, no! Mrs Granger gave them to me, and she exercises with me, too."

"Oh, so it's her fault. And what's that on your chest? When did you start wearing a bra?"

Harry sighed. He supposed this was the first time her mother had probably taken a good look at her, and the spandex did make the bra a lot more obvious, but why did she bring that up now?

"Since this summer. Mrs Granger noticed that I needed them to stay more modest so she bought me a few."

That seemed to calm the woman down a little. Harry was still debating with himself over whether he should go down or not. He heard a small creak and craned his neck to look down the stairs. He saw Hermione looking up at him, bed clothes in hand and with wet hair. She seemed very indecisive too.

"Why didn't you come to me for a bra?" Molly finally said, her voice now very firm instead of shouting.

"If I had been here, I would have, but I was at the Grangers. There was no easy way to contact you and Mrs Granger was very insistent on helping," Ginny explained.

"You could have owled me," Molly insisted.

"It would have been too late," Ginny defended herself. "After she said I needed some, she immediately took Hermione and me shopping."

Harry could hear the woman huff from where he was.

"At least give me those ridiculous clothes and any others like them and then get dressed. We need to go shopping for school supplies this afternoon. I've been waiting on you to get home."

This was where it was it going to get really ugly, Harry knew. He started slowly and silently creeping down the stairs. Hermione looked up at him with fear on her face. She knew what would probably happen as well as he did.

"We'll stay here," Ginny said in a quiet voice, dreading what was coming.

"Nonsense, you need to come. Now, get out of those clothes and don't make me tell you again."

Harry was almost at the bottom of the stairs. He motioned for Hermione to stay back.

"Not really, Mum. You see, since the book list came to me, we went shopping two weeks ago."

"What?" Molly yelled. "And how did you pay for that? You didn't let them buy that too?"

"I had some extra spending money left over from what Dad gave me for my trip ..."

"There is no way you could afford all of your school things with 'extra spending money', young lady."

Ginny was quiet for a moment and Harry took that moment to step into the room, the intense look on his face giving away how he felt about this conversation.

"It doesn't matter if she could or not, Mrs Weasley," he said evenly. The woman spun around, surprised to see him there. "I have an

arrangement with your husband. If I want to buy her a book or two, I will. If I think a new set of robes would make her happy, I'm allowed to buy them for her."

"But, that could be over twenty Galleons! And don't think I've forgotten about the radio." Molly's look dared him to disagree.

Harry shrugged. "It doesn't matter. A gift is a gift. The same applies to anything my mother gave Ginny."

Molly looked thunderous, but she held it. With a soft growl, she stormed from the room. "Be ready to go to Diagon Alley in an hour," she threw over her shoulder as her feet pounded on the steps as she headed back to the kitchen.

Harry looked at Ginny, his unhappiness fully visible now.

"We'll talk about it later, Harry. Go tell Ron to get ready while I shower and change," she told him.

He nodded after a moment, not fully trusting himself to speak about what just happened. Heading out, he looked over at Hermione and over her shoulder, he saw Percy standing at his door and looking at them with an amazed expression, blinking owlily. Harry nodded to him and walked up the stairs.

In Ron's room, his friend looked up from his magazine. "I really don't want to know, do I?"

"No, you don't," Harry said softly, still very upset at the woman. "If you didn't hear, we're leaving in an hour to go to Diagon Alley. You're supposed to be ready before then."

"Not a problem, I'm ready now." Ron looked at him carefully. "I'd ask if you'd like to play a game of chess to get your mind off of things, but I don't think that would work too well. How about flying instead?"

Harry took a deep breath and gave a faint smile. "Thanks, Ron, that might be just what I need at the moment."

They quietly went downstairs and snuck past Ron's mother before heading out. A few minutes later, Harry was feeling the wind whip through his hair. By the time Hermione called them down so they could go, Harry felt almost normal - almost.

After putting their brooms away, the boys joined the others. Mrs Weasley led them all through the Floo and into the shopping district. The first place they went was Madam Malkin's. Ron grumbled about being there, but he had outgrown his school robes, and there was a note about dress robes, which Molly hoped to find for cheap.

"If you'll excuse us for a few minutes, Mrs Weasley," Harry said formally, "I need to visit Gringotts and the girls said they would like to accompany me. I'm sure we'll return before you are finished here."

The woman stared at him for a moment as she considered the white marble building she could see not far away out the window. "You and Hermione may go, but Ginny needs to stay here. I need to get her robes for school."

"I already have some, Mum," Ginny told her, not looking her in the eye.

Molly glared at Harry. "She saw something she really liked and so I bought them." When Molly did not respond, Harry continued. "We'll be back in a few minutes." Without waiting for a reply, he turned and the two girls hurriedly followed him.

Harry practically growled, "Ginny..."

"Not now, Harry," she hissed quietly. "I promise we'll talk about it this evening, but this is not a good time or place."

As Harry struggled with that, Hermione added, "She's right, Harry. Stay calm a little longer."

He took a deep breath and slowly let it out as they walked into the bank. After a few minutes in line, a goblin took them to the carts and took them to his school vault.

The three walked inside. Harry was still angry and started throwing money into his bag. Ginny reached out and gently took it from him. He glared at her, but she handed the bag to Hermione.

"Hold this please," she asked her friend, who took the bag. Ginny pulled Harry to the side so they were not in direct view of the goblin. She pushed Harry against the wall and proceeded to snog him thoroughly. He only protested for a brief moment before his arms went to her waist and he returned the kiss. When she backed up, she smiled impishly at him before going over to Hermione and taking the bag from her. "Your turn to calm him down."

Hermione almost laughed, but she kept it to a smile and walked over to Harry, who was looking back and forth between the two girls. She heard Ginny continue to fill the money bag while she pressed herself against Harry and applied her lips to his. He was more eager this time. When she broke the kiss, she told him, "Now, keep those thoughts front and centre until this evening."

"OK," Harry said, somewhat dreamily.

They left the vault and went back to the clothing shop. When they arrived, Mrs Weasley had a few school robes but proclaimed there were no decent second-hand dress robes for Ron. He would have to wear some of Arthur's old ones.

It took another hour, but they bought books and potions supplies for the twins and Ron before heading home for a late lunch. Arthur was

there when they arrived.

The family and guests sat down for a very quiet lunch. The tension was palpable, causing the twins to be unnaturally quiet, at least for them. When lunch was over, all the teens beat a hasty retreat to their rooms.

When they arrived on the floor for Ginny's room, Harry looked at Ron. "I need to talk to them for a few moments. I'll be up soon."

Ron took the hint and nodded. "Do you want to play some chess when you come up?"

Harry smiled, "Sure, go ahead and set the board up."

The trio walked into Ginny's room. As soon as she closed the door, Harry threw up six silencing charms to fully contain their conversation. "I know it's not evening yet, but I'm so angry I don't know that I can hold it in much longer," he told them fiercely.

Ginny, trying to prevent an ugly situation, walked over and pulled him into a hug. He was a little stiff, but he did not fight her. "I know this is hard, Harry, but I really don't think every day will be like this. We've surprised her a lot today. We also only have a week and then we'll be back at school."

"I can't take much more of this, Ginny. I also won't stand for any more of her treating you like you're three. You're thirteen and you have your own friends, and we are real people with brains and feelings," he said passionately.

Hermione came over to them. Ginny loosened her grip and slid over so Hermione could enter and make it a three-way hug. "Ginny's right. It's only for another week. But I understand what you're feeling. I hated how she couldn't even trust me over a little newspaper. I don't want to come back here next summer like we have for this summer

and last."

"We won't," Harry agreed with finality. "I'll call in the Life Debt if I have to, but none of us will come back here if we don't feel like it."

Ginny stretched up and kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks, Harry." She took a deep breath and sighed. "I'll want to come visit from time to time to see my brothers and Dad, but I agree too, I don't want to stay here anymore after this summer."

"Harry," Hermione said a little hesitantly, "you know that might force us to tell both of our parents about the bond. I think we can avoid it, but it could be a risk."

He squeezed both of them to him and held them that way for a long moment. "I know, but I still hope we can keep the bond secret and avoid all the yelling from everyone." He chuckled for a moment and the girls gave him questioning looks. "We should include Sirius in that conversation as well; he can help us."

Ginny giggled and Hermione chuckled as they imagined the old Marauder's reaction.

"That will make it amusing," Ginny said.

A true smile came to Harry for the first time in the conversation. He gave each of them a quick hug. "I should probably go upstairs before Ron comes back down looking for me."

They each gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before he took his spells down. As he opened the door, they all heard stomping coming up the stairs. Harry pulled back and stood behind the slightly-open door.

A door slammed on the floor below them and then muffled yelling started.

"Arthur, he can't keep doing that to her. I won't stand for it!"

Harry looked at Ginny with anger on his face and she grimaced in the pause from shouting.

"Don't you 'Molly' me! I told you, I won't stand for it any longer!"

There was a pause and the three strained to hear.

"I don't care about any bloody arrangement you have with him. It's shameful the way he buys things for her, and the things he buys! It's as if he thinks she's his to do with as he pleases. Ar..." The shouting cut off in mid-rant.

Harry had to consciously work at maintaining his temper, lest it get the best of him. His partial calm of a moment ago was completely gone. He spoke through gritted teeth. "What if I can't take another week of this? She's purposefully exaggerating things to make you sound like a ... a tramp or something." Suddenly turning, he saw tears in her eyes so he grabbed the redhead and held her close in a tight hug. "Don't listen to her, Ginny. She's completely wrong. You're a wonderful person."

Ginny sniffled a little as she laid her head on his shoulder. After a long moment, she sniffed hard one last time and then let go of him. "Thank you, Harry, but I'm OK, really. It just caught me a little by surprise. You better go up. Like you said, Ron will come looking for you if you take too long."

He looked her over and then looked to Hermione. "Take care of her, will you please?"

"Of course," Hermione said with a caring smile. She walked over and pulled Ginny into a loose hug and rubbed her back. "Go on, Harry. I think Ginny and I need to talk; we'll come find you later."

Harry leaned over and lightly kissed both girls on the top of the head before he headed out. He closed the door to the room, and as he turned to go up the stairs, he saw Percy standing in his doorway and looking at him thoughtfully.

"Mr Potter," he said pleasantly. In fact, it was the friendliest that Percy had ever spoken to him.

Harry nodded to his bond-mate's brother and hurried up the stairs, wondering why Percy was acting a little differently. As he reached Ron's room, he heard someone going down the stairs. By process of elimination, he knew it had to be Percy. The girls were in Ginny's room, Ron was visible in his room, and the twins' room was on the same floor as their parents' room.

He was about to go into Ron's room when he heard a loud knocking. He froze in the doorway of Ron's room; his friend looking at him and obviously wondering why he was just standing there. Some instinct told him to stay where he was. He barely heard the next bit of conversation.

"Now's not a good time, Percy."

"Actually, Father, now is an excellent time as understanding will come easier."

"What are you on about?"

"What I'm trying to communicate is that I believe the direction this family is going is the wrong one..."

"What?" Arthur Weasley's raised voice was a little easier to hear now.

"I said," Percy raised his voice a little as well, "this family is heading in the wrong direction, and I cease to desire to be a part of it."

"What are you talking about?" Molly Weasley asked, easily heard up two flights of stairs.

Harry looked at Ron. His friend got up and quietly walked over. They both stood at the railing to hear better.

"I hardly know where to begin, I have so many choices," Percy said with disdain. "Shall I start with how the family can barely put food on the table? Or how about that the family is disintegrating? Perhaps the lack of ambition by some in this family is a good place to start? Or..."

A loud slap was heard. Harry and Ron both winced at that.

"Or we can discuss abuse," Percy said bravely, as if he had not been interrupted. "No matter, I have better things to do and better places to be. I must pack and be off. Good-bye."

The two boys heard Percy walk up the stairs. They were so shocked, neither moved. As Percy came up to the second floor and headed towards his room, he looked up and gave a brief nod to both of them. They heard his door close a moment later.

"Blimey..." Ron whispered.

Harry was not sure what to think. A door opening and footsteps got his attention. He saw Hermione and Ginny at the bottom of the stairs and Ginny was waving him down and hoarsely whispering, "Harry!"

"Er, back in a minute, Ron."

His friend looked a little hurt at not being included, but he nodded and returned to his room. Harry hurried down as fast as he could and still keep it quiet. Ginny had already started walking towards Percy's room and Hermione grabbed his hand and pulled him along.

Ginny wondered if this was Percy's moment to leave. She opened the door and walked in, Harry and Hermione were right behind her now. She waved her hand at the door and Hermione closed it.

Ginny looked around and saw that the room was bare, except for one trunk standing in the middle of the room, next to Percy himself.

"Ginevra," he said calmly, as if nothing had just happened and as if the red hand-print on his left cheek did not exist.

"I knew you'd make it dramatic, Percy. That was either the bravest thing I've ever seen, or the sneakiest thing I've seen. I suppose it depends on whether you did that just for yourself, or for others too," Ginny reasoned.

Percy looked slightly amused. "Or perhaps because it was the easiest time to do it."

Ginny cocked her head and thought about it. "Naw, it's too easy to get Mum riled up."

For the first time Harry could remember, Percy actually smiled.

"Too true. I was going to wait until next summer, but I found a very good deal on a place to live. And..." Percy walked the few steps over to his sister and laid a hand on her shoulder caringly. "And I thought you could use the distraction while you finish your week here."

Ginny threw her arms around his body and hugged him tightly. "Thanks, Percy!"

He patted her on the back and scrutinized her. "Does Mr Potter treat you well, Ginny?"

"Like a princess," she said with a grin. "We're best friends and we watch each other's backs."

Percy nodded, as if that was the only correct answer. He looked up at Harry. "I was unaware you had an arrangement with Father, Mr Potter."

Harry felt like he had been punched he was so surprised at that being brought up. It took a brief moment, but he realized Percy was referring to what Mrs Weasley had shouted not too long before. "Err, uh, yeah, I do. I would appreciate it if you kept that to yourself."

"Of course, Mr Potter. It is family business and no one else's. I must say that makes me feel better about several things." Percy paused briefly, but it was obvious he had more to say. "However, while that will help Ginny, if I may be so forward, would it be correct for me to assume that you and Ginny have agreed on the role Miss Granger will have? If my sister's husband will have a mistress, I would feel better if she gave her blessing first."

Harry heard a rustle of clothing and, despite that his gaze never wavered from Percy, his hand shot out to the side to grip Hermione's wand hand that was next to him. He hoped she stayed quiet this once.

Before he or Hermione could say anything, Ginny quickly spoke up. "Percy, that is a private matter between the three of us. Also, we are still a little young to formalize everything, but we are aware of the possibilities."

Feeling it was for the best, Harry nodded and stayed silent. To his relief, Hermione said nothing.

Before more could be said, they all heard stomping coming up the stairs. Percy quickly let go of Ginny and walked back to his trunk.

"Percy, please talk to Dad at work. Even if you have to make him swear a secrecy oath to keep it all from Mum, talk to him. He'll

understand, I know he will," Ginny quietly pleaded.

As the heavy footsteps reached the landing and turned to come this way, Percy gave one last smile. "I'll consider it. Until we meet again..." He gave a short formal bow to Harry and a nod to Hermione before an overly loud Apparation crack filled the room, and Percy and trunk were gone.

The door burst open and Mrs Weasley stood there. The anger on her face drained away as she took in the empty room. "Percy?" she softly called in vain and stepped into the room. The trio used the moment of Mrs Weasley looking lost to leave the room; she made no effort to stop them. In fact, it was like she did not even see them.

Hermione still looked a little upset over Percy's comment, but Harry felt it was best to let Ginny cool her down, so he went back upstairs. He found Ron sitting on his bed and looking at his chessboard. He was picking up the pieces and examining each one carefully, as if inspecting it for damage.

"Why do you think Percy left?"

Harry was surprised by the question. He decided that being vague would be best. "You're his brother. Wouldn't you know him best?"

Ron put the rook he was holding down and picked a knight up. "I'm not sure anyone really knows Percy. I guess I'm asking if he said anything about why when you went down."

"No, not really." Thinking he had to say something, Harry said, "He did say he was leaving a little sooner than he had originally planned."

Ron nodded and put the knight down before turning to Harry with a sad look. "There's been a lot of yelling here today, a lot more than usual."

Harry could not decide whether to be upset at that or not. Doing his best to keep his voice level, he asked, "Are you saying it's my fault?"

Ron looked a little surprised. "No, not at all, I was only noticing... I mean..." He stopped and Harry did not say anything. "I suppose I mean that I'm not surprised Percy left. I thought when Bill and Charlie left, it was only something you do when you finish Hogwarts. But then, I had barely turned, uh," Ron paused a thought for a moment, "nine and eleven when they left. I suppose I'm wondering if there were other reasons for them leaving." Ron shrugged as if saying he was not sure about anything he had just said.

Not sure what to do, Harry came over and sat across from Ron, with the chess board between them. "I don't know, Ron. But if I were you and really wanted to know, I'd write them and ask." Harry moved a white pawn forward.

Ron responded by moving a black pawn. "I'll think about it."

They played the game for a few minutes before Ron broke the silence. "Harry, you've changed a lot this summer. I never would have imagined you standing up to Mum like you did this morning."

Harry considered which piece to move. In a way, it probably did not matter: Ron would win anyway. Chess was merely a way for them to spend some time together as friends, or what passed for friendship for them. Harry did not consider them all that close anymore. "I've had to. A lot has changed since last Christmas." When Ron did not say anything, Harry added, "I've also spent a lot of time with Sirius lately and he's taught me a lot about the Wizarding World and ... well, and my supposed place in it." Harry moved his knight.

"What place is that?" Ron asked curiously, as he moved a bishop with little apparent thought.

"I'm the last of the Potters, Ron, the very last one in my family. I have

a family name to uphold and a place in our society. I'll never be the ponce that Malfoy is, but I am a wizard and the head of my family. If I'm to fit into that, there are things I have to know and things I'll have to do some day." Not knowing what else to do, Harry moved his queen.

"Like what?" Ron casually asked as he took Harry's queen with a rook Harry had not paid attention to.

Wincing at his stupidity in losing his queen, Harry picked up his pieces and put them back in the starting position, conceding that game. Ron smiled and reset his pieces as well.

"Like knowing how our government works, knowing the customs, knowing how to dance, knowing..."

"Did you say you have to know how to dance?" Ron asked wide-eyed, as if he had just seen a spider. "I thought you were trying to pull one over on me when you said that the other day."

"Sirius said I needed to know how to act at social gatherings, and that included dancing. Ginny taught both me and Mr Granger, while Sirius taught Hermione and Mrs Granger." Harry smiled as he remembered the time they had spent learning and then later dancing for fun. "It's not so bad. Ginny is a good dancer and Hermione became one."

"You're mental," Ron told him. "Go ahead and move first again. You need all the help you can get."

"In that case..." Harry grinned as he pulled Ron's queen off the board and then moved the pawn in front of his own king.

Ron smiled. "A little bit of a challenge, but you're still going down, Potter..." Ron did indeed win that game, but he had a harder time than normal.

Dinner that evening was another quiet meal. Mrs Weasley kept glancing at the empty place where Percy usually sat. Harry was grateful for the sacrifice Percy had made. He hoped it worked out for the usually stuffy Weasley boy.

When dinner ended, Mrs Weasley asked Ron and Hermione to help clear the table while she put the extra food away. Harry briefly wondered if she did that because she wanted Ron and Hermione to date one day, but decided he was probably reading things into the situation that probably were not there simply because he was unhappy with the woman.

Mr Weasley excused himself to the living room and Ginny leaned over and very quietly whispered in Harry's ear. "Go up to your room and stay there a bit. I need to talk to Dad alone."

He narrowed his eyes at her, as he tried to figure out what she was doing.

"I need to talk to him about Percy, and I need to warn him that he needs to stop Mum from making things worse."

"Ginny..." he hissed.

She put two fingers over his lips to silence him. "It's only fair I should warn him. Don't worry, I won't give any secrets away. Go," she shooed him.

Afraid of what might happen, yet having no good reason to stop her, he got up and left for Ron's room, hoping Ginny knew what she was doing.

As Ron and Hermione came back for their next load of dishes to carry into the kitchen, Ginny grabbed a wicker basket out of the pantry and went to find her father.

"Dad? I noticed that some of the pears in the top of the trees were ready to be picked. Will you help me get them? You can also check on the apples," she said.

Her father looked at her for a moment before his eyes suddenly brightened. He put down the book in his hands and stood. "A capital idea. I've been meaning to ask you about your summer as well." He opened the back door and they walked out. "How was your trip?"

"It was great," she said enthusiastically with a big grin. "Switzerland and the Alps are beautiful. The hiking was great, as was going with Sirius, the Grangers, and of course Harry and Hermione. Sirius spent most evenings teaching Harry customs and things. I even learned a few things too."

"Oh, like what?"

"Like how the Ministry works, especially the Wizengamot, and a few charms, like to heal small cuts and things." She purposefully did not mention the Blasting and Cutting hexes, the Shield spell, nor the Bubble-Head charm.

Arthur nodded. "That's useful. How was the rest of your summer? I missed you on your birthday." He gave her a very caring smile.

"I missed you too, but the rest of the time was just as good. The Grangers are very nice and they treated me just like Hermione and Harry. We got to visit Sirius at least once a week when we were at their house, or else he would come over. He's really funny." She giggled.

He chuckled with her. As they entered the orchard, he drew his wand. "Ready?"

"Ready!" Ginny sang as she gripped the basket tightly. She loved

doing this with her father.

He levitated her to the top of the tree. She quickly found the ripe fruit and put it in the basket. They went from tree to tree, getting the fruit that could not be reached from the ground or by climbing into the tree.

When they finished the pears, the basket was quite full. Ginny set it down and they walked back to check on the apples.

Her father looked them over. "I think they'll be ready in a week or so, right as my help leaves for school," he said teasingly.

Ginny smiled back, but it was not as happy as before. "Dad, you need to do something or we won't be here even that long." Her father froze. She wished he was facing her so she could see his expression, but he was facing away from her.

"What do you mean?" he softly asked as he turned around, his expression neutral.

"While you were gone this morning, Mum yelled at Harry twice. She also took Hermione's newspaper away from her, until Harry summoned it back. That was bad, but the worst was when she yelled at me, making me sound like a ... she called me 'shameful'."

Her father sighed and looked down.

"Dad, Harry may not like what she does to him, but he won't stand for anything bad being done to me or Hermione. Once more this week and he'll take us both away," she told him bluntly.

He shook his head as if he did not believe her. "I can't believe that she..." He paused for a moment. "That would be very upsetting for your mother."

"Harry won't care, Dad. Mum can scream and yell all she wants, but Harry only has to make one decision and have one conversation with you and it will be a long time before she sees me again."

His head shot up and he looked at her with alarm.

She smiled to soften the moment. "I'll still seek you out, Dad, but Harry won't put up with what she does. No matter what Mum does or wants, when it comes to deciding what happens to me, Harry will win in the end. I will only stay here as long as Harry is convinced I'm happy, and as long as we're not being mistreated."

Her father came over and pulled her into a hug and she returned it in joy. He always understood her and she loved him for it.

"Please ask him to be as patient as possible. I'd really rather not have to deal with losing two children in the same week," he told her sadly.

"We'll try, we'll really try," she told him honestly.

"Thank you, Angel," he told her lovingly and planted a light kiss on the top of her head. "Since you've delivered your message, I suppose we can take the fruit in now?"

"It was my decision; Harry didn't want me to do it. I think he didn't want me to get into trouble." She went to pick up the basket of fruit, but Arthur waved his wand and it floated, staying a few steps in front of him as they slowly walked.

He gave her an understanding look. "Harry really is a good lad."

Deciding this was a good place to change the topic, Ginny blurted out, "Dad, Percy is a good lad too."

He looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

"Please talk to him at work," she said with a little pleading in her voice. "Promise him you'll keep everything secret from Mum, and he may tell you some things you really want to know." He looked sceptical, so she added, "I may be wrong, but I do think it would be worth the effort."

He did not say anything for a moment. "Do you know something about why he left home, besides what he said?"

"Not exactly, but I do have a few good guesses," she admitted.

"I'll consider it," he finally said.

They walked into the house a few minutes later. Her mother looked pleased to see the basket of fruit. Hoping things would go well for the evening, Ginny joined the other five, which included the twins, in a game of Exploding Snap. To her relief, there were no more arguments for the rest of the day.

The next day, the trio got up very early before anyone else was up and quietly left the house. Harry set up Sirius's tent on the side of the house where Ginny's mother was unlikely to see it by looking out a window. In there, Harry and Ginny changed clothes in separate bedrooms. Then Harry silenced the main room of the tent and Harry and Ginny did their exercises to the music from the Wizarding Wireless in there. Hermione sat on a couch and read. She had decided to come as a form of protection, so no one could say Harry and Ginny were alone and doing something "shameful". The cardio exercise was followed by some callisthenics from Harry's exercise book. When they were done, Harry and Ginny each showered and changed into their normal clothes, before Harry took the tent back down.

That would become their normal ritual for the rest of the week. Harry had sent a secret letter to Sirius yesterday telling him he would like

his godfather to meet them on Platform 9 ¾ and Harry would give the tent back then; they had a use for it in the meantime.

Arthur joined everyone else for an unusually late breakfast, at least late for him on a work day.

"I'd thought you'd be at work by now, Dad," Ron said.

"Normally I would be, but I decided to stay home from work today. I thought a little time for private reflection after everything that has happened in the last few days was needed. I think the Ministry and Perkins can do without me for a day," Arthur said casually as he spread jam on his toast. His newspaper was sitting beside his plate, as Hermione's was beside hers.

Harry was quite relieved the man stayed home, after the difficulty they had yesterday. Mrs Weasley would give Harry questioning looks throughout the day, but fortunately, she did not say anything against them. Even when Arthur went back to work the following day, she continued in the same way. While not perfect, it was tolerable. Nevertheless, by the end of the week, Harry vowed they would never stay inside The Burrow for more than a single night - preferably not even that long - never, ever again.

(A/N: Back to Hogwarts next chapter.)

Chapter 16 - The Unexpected

The morning of the first of September was chaotic at The Burrow, except for three people. Hermione had made sure she, Ginny, and Harry had packed the night before. Ron and the twins had ignored her organizational prompting. Mr and Mrs Weasley were doing their best to get their children ready to leave on time.

As the time neared half-past ten, Ginny stopped her father as he stuck his head in the doorway to check on them.

"Dad? How are we getting to the station this morning?"

He smiled brightly, as if he had just solved a most difficult problem. "I thought we could take the Floo to the Leaky Cauldron, and then take a Muggle taxi."

"Uh, Mr Weasley?"

"Yes, Hermione."

"Considering what time it is already, I'm not sure we'll make it before the train leaves. Have you considered Side-Along Apparation for us to the train Platform? I know you and Mrs Weasley would have to take us one at a time and there are six of us, but that's only three trips each and it is a short distance Apparation from the Leaky Cauldron," Hermione suggested.

Mr Weasley looked surprised. "I've never considered that before. Molly doesn't like to leave any children on their own, but you're correct, it would speed the process up."

A devious smile came over Ginny's face. "If the others are going to take much longer, you could start by taking the three of us now so you won't be as rushed later."

Her father thought about that for a moment and then smiled. "Gather your things, I'll be right back."

He walked into the next room and they could hear him shout up the stairs. "Molly? I'll be back up in a few minutes." If his wife answered, none of the trio could hear her.

Arthur came back and pulled his wand out. A few quick waves and their trunks shrunk to the size of a Quaffle. Each picked up their trunk and put it into their book bag, which they slung over their shoulders. Arthur directed them to use the Floo. A minute later, all were at the famous WIZARDING pub.

Thinking for a moment, Arthur selected Hermione to go first, then Harry, followed by Ginny last. That way, Harry would never be by himself. Arthur felt the boy needed to be protected, if Death Eaters were active again - although, admittedly, none had been seen since the Quidditch World Cup. Dumbledore had told him earlier in the summer that Harry had to be kept safe.

Each student in turn latched onto Arthur's arm as directed, and then they felt the squeeze only to reappear on Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ a couple of seconds later.

When Arthur arrived with Ginny, he smiled at them and looked at Hermione. "This was an excellent idea." The brunette blushed slightly. "Please go and find a compartment on the train. I'll return as soon as I can with the others. I'm sure Molly will want to say good-bye to you then." He left with a crack.

"I think he had a good idea," Harry said as he led them towards the train. The platform was starting to get busy, but was not too crowded yet. They had no trouble getting a compartment in the last car, their usual place. Harry dug Sirius's tent out of his bag. All three expanded their trunks back to normal size to hold their places while they went back onto the train platform.

As they walked back towards the Apparation area, they saw Sirius pop in.

Harry grinned and hurried over to his godfather.

"Harry, how are you doing?" Sirius greeted him with an enthusiastic hug, which Harry returned.

"Better now," Harry said with a sheepish grin.

Sirius laughed. "You're not the first person to tell me that Molly is quite a character. I found your letter amusing."

"It's amusing as long as you weren't there," he muttered. "I brought your tent back. Thanks! You don't know how much it helped to give us a little space." Harry handed the bundle over.

Sirius stuck the tent under his arm as he looked at the two girls. "And how are you two young ladies doing?" he asked as he led them across the platform.

"Better, just like Harry said," Ginny spoke up quickly.

Hermione nodded in agreement. "Sirius, why are you leading us towards the Portal to the Muggle side?"

"Because I have a surprise for you two." He grinned at Hermione and Harry.

Hermione's face lit up. "Really?" She walked faster and hurried through the Portal. Harry was not far behind her.

Ginny looked indecisive, so Sirius put his hand on her shoulder and pushed her gently forward. "I'm sure they'll want to say hi to you, too," he told her.

She shyly walked through the Portal as well.

Harry hugged Dan while Hermione hugged her mother as if she never wanted to let go.

"Did you really miss us that much?" Dan asked.

"You have no idea," Harry drawled with much emotion.

"Oh? What happened?" Emma asked as she got Hermione to let go so she could give her son a hug.

"My mother," Ginny said with disappointment. "She can be very nice in public, but it was a very long week at home." She almost mentioned wanting to go back to the Grangers, but decided that was probably best left unsaid. It would raise too many questions they did not want to answer.

"I believe," Sirius quickly added, "that the difficulties at the Quidditch Cup probably caused her extra worry, and I doubt she reacted well to that."

Ginny nodded; it was the easiest thing to do.

"Well, I'm glad you're all right," Emma told them. "I was a little worried when Sirius suggested we come meet you here to say good-bye."

"We'll be fine, Mum, really, but it was good to see you even for a few minutes after this last week," Hermione confessed. "It makes me appreciate you that much more." Her mother gave her a caring smile.

"Time for a hurried good-bye, the train will be leaving soon," Sirius reminded them.

The Granger parents and Sirius hugged all three teens before Sirius

escorted them back through the Portal. The train blew a warning whistle, causing them all to step lively.

"Ginny! There you are!" called an exasperated Molly Weasley. "I've been looking all over for you." She hurried over, followed by her husband and Ron. The twins had presumably already boarded the train.

"I took them out to say good-bye to Hermione's parents, Molly," Sirius bravely said. "It was my fault."

Molly frowned at him, but did not say anything else on the topic. When she looked at her husband, Sirius winked at Harry, who had to control himself not to laugh.

Ginny gave her mother a quick hug and her father a longer one. While she was hugging her father, he whispered, "Thank you for telling me to talk to Percy. I have a difficult charade to play, but better that than losing a son." He gave her a tight squeeze before letting her go. Ginny wondered if that was a tear in his eye, but she thought it better not to ask, so she gave him a big smile, which he returned.

The trio and Ron hurried onto the train and went to their compartment. Harry saw Neville on the way and waved for him to join them. The trio took one bench, with Harry in the middle, while the other two boys took the other bench.

"Did you have a good summer, Neville?" Harry asked.

"Yeah I did. How about you?"

"Most of it was spectacular..." They spent the rest of the train ride talking about their summer.

They were sitting at the Welcoming Feast enjoying the food and getting reacquainted with some of their friends after the summer

holidays. Harry thought his new observations on the way some of the girls, like Lavender, had changed over the summer were due to seeing Ginny change. Not that he planned on mentioning that to his bond-mates. He was not that stupid.

The Headmaster stood as the time of eating ended to make his usual announcements. "I would like to welcome back our returning students, and welcome our new students for the first time. I believe this will be a truly wonderful and unique year."

All heads spun as the main doors to the Great Hall opened suddenly. A somewhat gnarled-looking older man walked in, the peg in place of his lower left leg making him lurch distinctively. He was half bald, and what remained of his hair was long and thinning; he also had a bright blue magical eye that moved crazily, never sitting still.

"Ah, our new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. Everyone, please welcome Professor Alastor Moody, who recently retired as an Auror." Dumbledore started to clap politely, the other teachers soon following suit. Most of the student body made a polite attempt that did not last nearly as long as their staring.

The man stumped his way to the head table and sat on the end next to Hagrid. Everyone was looking him over. The first impression was not a friendly one.

"As I was saying," Dumbledore carried on as soon as he could, "this should be a wonderful and unique year. We will be sharing our Halloween Feast with a contingent from two other schools." Murmurs broke out, but Dumbledore barely paused. "This year, we will be resuming the Triwizard Tournament. Fame and one thousand Galleons will go to the winner." He smiled through his white beard as the student voices rose. He let them carry on for a moment before he raised his hands.

"While indeed exciting, this is a very serious thing as contestants

have been gravely injured in the past. Therefore, I will restrict entries to those who are seventeen by Halloween, as that is when the contestants are to be chosen."

Harry heard Fred and George Weasley, among others, protest. He assumed the sixth-year twins' seventeenth birthday was shortly after that.

When he could get everyone's attention again, Dumbledore continued his announcement. "To allow this tournament to be properly hosted, I'm afraid I shall have to cancel the inter-house Quidditch games this year." That brought a bigger protest than the announcement of the age limit for the tournament.

"I'm sorry," the Headmaster said when he could be heard, "but it must be this way."

Angelina, the obvious choice for her house's Quidditch captain after Oliver Wood finished school last year, pulled up her Gryffindor courage and swiftly stood. "Headmaster, I must protest. For those of us who plan to seek a career in professional Quidditch, you are hurting our chances to succeed."

Dumbledore turned to the sixth-year Gryffindor. "Miss Johnson, I sympathize with the position I've put you and others in, but I'm afraid the teachers do not have time to help with that and with the Tournament too. The Tournament will take precedence," he said firmly.

Angelina did not give up. "Headmaster, what if we helped run the games. What would it take for us to have a season anyway?"

The Headmaster smiled at her. "Obviously, Madam Hooch would have to be convinced to referee, but the students would have to take on the tasks of setting a schedule that does not interfere with classes or the Tournament, getting everyone to the games and arranging

security, hosting our visiting students, as well as several other minor but important tasks. You would also have to finish the season by the end of April."

Angelina looked at the Ravenclaw table next to her. "Davies?"

Roger Davies looked around his table and saw several nodding heads. "We're in."

"Diggory?" She called.

Cedric Diggory did not check with his table, but said, "We're in, too."

"Pucey, or whoever would be captain for the Slytherins?" She called to the furthest table from her.

Pucey took charge and looked around. There was hoarse whispering for a moment, sounding almost like hissing snakes, before he replied in a loud voice, "We'll play."

"Very well," Dumbledore said with a smile. "Miss Johnson, I leave this in your hands to organize a meeting with the other captains to make arrangements. Please coordinate your plans with Professor McGonagall."

"Thank you, sir," Angelina said with a smile as she sat down and most of the student body clapped loudly. Her fellow Chasers and neighbours at the table hugged her in their congratulations.

"As usual, the Forbidden Forest is still off limits, and I remind you that a basilisk now resides there. There is also to be no magic in the corridors: see your student handbook or your head of house if you need further clarification. Prefects, you are in charge of helping the first-years to find their dorm rooms. I hope everyone has a pleasant evening. Be back here at seven in the morning for breakfast and to get your timetables to start class at eight. Good night!" Dumbledore

sat down looking very pleased.

"Wow, did you hear him?" Ron asked loudly. "A thousand Galleons for the winner."

Harry shook his head. "A tournament which we can't enter, and I don't want to enter even if I could."

"But think of the fame!" Ron argued, as the group of friends walked towards the Gryffindor Tower.

"I have enough fame already and I don't like it, and I certainly don't want more," Harry said firmly. When it looked like Ron was going to argue, Harry changed tack. "Besides, if this was so special, name one previous winner."

Whatever Ron was about to say stuck in his throat. After a moment, he quietly said, "I, uh, I can't think of any."

"Then there's not really any fame, is there," Harry rhetorically asked, and Ron wisely did not try to answer that.

"OK, but there's the money. A thousand Galleons is a lot of money," Ron said with a gleam in his eye.

Ginny shook her head, well aware of why her brother was saying this. "Ron, didn't you hear what the Headmaster said? People in it have been seriously hurt before."

"But magic can fix things," he argued.

Hermione looked at the thick-headed boy. "Ron, I'll have to research it, but if I correctly remember what I've read about Tournaments in the past, contestants have died. Magic can't fix that. Also, did you see our new Defence Professor? Magic didn't totally fix him."

"Just think, I could get a Firebolt and a new set of Quidditch pads..."

Hermione started to argue again, but Ginny put her hand on her bond-mate's arm. "Don't bother. He didn't hear anything once you mentioned 'research' and he's not listening now. Fortunately for him, he can't enter."

Ron was still mumbling to himself with a goofy grin on his face.

Harry looked at Neville and they both shook their heads at their dorm-mate. "You couldn't pay me to enter," Neville said.

"Me neither. We'd be three years behind the others." Harry looked at Ron, who was still mumbling about winning the Tournament. He had to agree with Ginny. It was a good thing Ron could not enter if he could not understand how dangerous the competition was.

A week later, Harry and friends were having lunch. The upcoming Defence class held most of their attention.

"I wonder what he's going to teach us today," Hermione excitedly asked.

Harry shrugged. "Last time he said it would be special. For a retired Auror, maybe that means duelling."

"I don't think so. We only learn a couple of offensive spells this year, and probably not until near the end," Hermione countered.

They talked about it a little more until Ginny asked, "What do you think will happen next year with Snape?"

"What do you mean?" Ron asked.

Hermione answered. "I think she's pointing out that since Professor Tonks has her Potions Mastery now, and she's taking over the

classes one year at a time, next year he'll be down to only two classes."

"Exactly," Ginny said brightly. "At what point do the school governors say he's not needed any more?"

"How about now?" Ron suggested with a grin before he finished his lunch.

Everyone except for Hermione laughed. She only smiled. "It's time to go," she announced and stood. The others followed her lead. Ginny left for her classes and the fourth years went to Defence.

Moody surprised them all and talked about the Unforgivable Curses. He furthered the surprise by demonstrating the Imperious Curse on an enlarged spider. Then he cast the Cruciatus Curse on it, and everyone cringed when it hissed piteously. After the torture curse, the professor put it out of its misery with the Killing Curse. The class was very quiet after that.

"That's what you have to look forward to if you go face-to-face with Death Eaters," the grizzled Auror told them. "Those curses are among their favourite tools, so you must practice **CONSTANT VIGILANCE!**" He yelled his catchphrase while slapping the nearest desk with his hand. Every student in the room jumped in surprise.

"Now, we certainly don't want to teach you those, but we do want to teach you to survive those curses." Moody looked around the room with his magical eye. "The Killing Curse ... well, only one person has been hit with that and survived." He fixed Harry with his natural eye. "No one knows how that was done, so you can discount doing the same thing.

"There are only two known ways to survive it: evade or block it. Spells move fast, but they aren't instantaneous. If the caster is not too close, you may have time to move out of its path. When at a

medium range or closer, this is your only hope: don't bother trying anything else, you won't have time. If the caster is further away, you can try to block the spell with something very solid, like a good sized rock, a piece of metal, or even something very solid that's conjured - if you are very good and very fast at conjuring. But at this point in your life, just jump.

"The Torture Curse is like having knives stuck into your body, everywhere at once." Many in the class cringed at that description. "If it's not held too long, you will survive, but it's best to treat it like the Killing Curse and don't get hit by it if you can help it.

"The Mind-Control Curse is not painful at all, and as long as you aren't ordered to do something that gets you killed, you'll live. Better yet, those of you who have a strong will can break the curse and then it won't affect you anymore." There were several whispers in the class when they heard that.

"Now, being an Auror and a teacher, I have special permission to do this for one class. Today, you are all going to experience the Imperius Curse."

Everyone started talking at once, so Moody fired off a Cannon Blast charm, causing the noise to instantly stop. "This is a double period, but we'll still have to hurry to get everyone in." He looked over the class of Gryffindors and Slytherins. "We start at the front. You, uh, Brown?"

"Yes, Professor?" Lavender said timidly.

"Please come up to the front of the room and dance for us."

"Sir?" she asked, eyes going wide.

Moody jabbed his wand at the girl. "Imperio! Come up to the front of the room and dance."

Without hesitation or complaint, Lavender slid out of her chair and walked to the front of the room without a word and started to dance to music only she could hear.

"Imperio! Join her in dancing."

Parvati Patil stood up and walked over to Lavender. The two girls danced: Lavender in a free style and Parvati in the more flowing style of her ancestral country.

Moody waved his wand over the two of them. "Go sit back down." The two girls blushed deeply in embarrassment and rushed to their seats. "They obeyed and, as you saw by their expressions when I released them, they knew what they had done, even if they couldn't stop it.

"Longbottom, Imperio! Come jump up on the desk."

Neville got up and obeyed the command, and did it without tripping or any hesitation. He hurried back to his desk once the spell was removed.

Moody looked at the next boy, who turned out to be Ron. "Imperio! I noticed that you feared the spider, go and pick one up out of the container, it won't hurt you."

Ron got up and went to the container of spiders and without hesitation he pulled one out. He let it crawl over his hand, turning his hand as the spider tried to run off it.

"Put the spider back and go sit down." Ron complied and then Moody removed the spell.

Ron instantly started freaking out. Moody hit him with a Cheering Charm, which helped a little, but Ron was still jumpy and looking for

spiders to stay away from.

"Potter, Imperio! Come up here and jump up on my desk."

Harry felt a wave of soothing calmness come over him. A voice told him to get up, so he did. As he walked to the front, part of him wondered about the voice and realized he did not really know that voice. When he reached the teacher's desk, he mentally pushed back and felt the voice leave him. He looked at Moody and smiled. "No thank you, sir." He turned to go back to his desk.

"Gallop gargoyles, he did it! Imperio! Jump up and down!"

Harry stopped walking in front of his desk as he felt the soothing calmness hit him again, but this time he knew what it meant. The voice spoke and Harry pushed the foreign intrusion away. With it gone, he took the last step and sat down again.

"Bravo, Potter! Bravo! Twenty points to Gryffindor."

"Harry?" Hermione quickly whispered.

"Question the voice and push back," he hurriedly whispered.

"Imperio! Granger, stand up and jump up and down."

Hermione stood up, but it was with jerky movements. Instead of jumping, she just stood there for a couple of seconds before she shuddered. With a smile at Harry, she sat back down.

"Great Merlin! Two in one class! Imperio! Yell an insult at Potter."

Hermione sat there for a moment before she calmly said, "No, sir."

"Bravo, Miss Granger, good show! Twenty more points to Gryffindor."

Moody looked at Dean Thomas and continued to work through the rest of the Gryffindors at the front of the class. Everyone else did what was ordered of them: various innocent but embarrassing things.

He then started on the Slytherins. If Moody had been a Slytherin as a student, he did not show any bias. If anything, he was a little crueller.

"Malfoy, Imperio! Come up here and let's hear if you were taught to sing. I want to hear you sing I'm A Little Teapot, complete with motions."

Draco Malfoy complied and did the song perfectly, including the arm and body motions. When Moody released him, Malfoy hurried back to his desk, his usual smug act nowhere to be found.

Harry could not resist so, as the Slytherin walked past him, he said quietly, "I guess not being able to resist that curse runs in the family."

Malfoy looked angry, but before he could retort, Moody asked, "Is there a problem, Mr Malfoy? Do you need a magical order to sit down?"

"No, sir," Malfoy said through clenched teeth, clearly having to restrain his temper. He walked back to his desk and sat.

Moody resumed his testing. No one else could resist the curse, only Harry and Hermione could. He sent them on their way at the end of their time with no homework except for reading the next chapter.

Ron practically ran out of the classroom.

Harry looked at Hermione as they walked out.

"That wasn't very nice of Professor Moody. Ron is really afraid of spiders," Hermione said.

"But it proved a valuable point, for anyone who noticed," Harry commented.

"What?" she asked.

Harry looked at Neville, who was walking beside him, giving him a chance to answer if he wanted.

"That the curse is so strong, it can make you do things you wouldn't possibly do otherwise, including things that can make you hurt yourself or those you love," Neville quietly said.

None of them said anything else on the way to Herbology. Ron was there waiting on them, but he did not do anything in class other than stand with the others and continually look around in a paranoid fashion. Harry motioned to Neville, who nodded and they covered for Ron. If Professor Sprout noticed Ron's lack of action or Harry's and Neville's actions of covering for their friend, she did not say anything.

After dinner, Hermione grabbed Harry and Ginny by the arm and guided them out of the portrait hole and to an unused room. She locked the door and silenced it. Harry and Ginny looked at each other as they sat, knees practically touching in the centre. Neither had a clue as to what was going on.

"Hermione?" Ginny asked.

"There's something important we need to discuss..."

"What?" Harry asked, concerned.

Hermione glanced at them both and hesitated briefly. "The Triwizard Tournament."

"What?" Harry asked cluelessly. "I promise, I'm not going to try and enter."

"That's very good," Hermione said seriously. "I checked and found there's an approximately twenty-three percent mortality rate among the contestants over the life of the Tournament."

"Bloody hell!" Ginny could not stop her reaction and Hermione glared darkly at the other girl.

"I know you don't like to hear it, Hermione, but she's got a point. With that kind of outcome, it's a wonder anyone enters," Harry said, trying to sooth the brunette.

Hermione thought for a few seconds and then gave a quick nod to Ginny, tacitly forgiving her outburst. "I know you're not going to try to enter, Harry, but that's not what we need to talk about."

"Then what?" he asked, seeing no clues from her expression.

"My research shows there is a Yule Ball that traditionally accompanies the Tournament..."

Harry blinked owlishly as he tried to process that.

Ginny lit up for a few seconds, then her expression turned sad and she sagged in her seat. "It's not fair," she said quietly.

"What?" Harry asked, still not understanding.

"Harry, we won't have the details until it's officially announced, but the Ball is normally for the older students. That means fourth year and up, although they could make it third year and up as that's when electives and Hogsmeade visits start, but probably not." Hermione now looked at Ginny with a pitying look.

He finally caught on. "Oh. Well, it's going to hit one of you. I mean, I can't take both of you, can I?"

"No, not without declaring ourselves," Ginny informed him.

Only seeing Hermione closely watching him stopped Harry from letting out his own expletive. "So what do we do?"

Hermione looked pensive. "I have two ideas, unless the announcement gives us details that contradict my assumptions." She looked at the other girl. "Ginny, do you have any ideas before I tell mine?"

Ginny shook her head. "Not a one, other than one of us not going, and I'm sure you want to go as badly as I do."

Hermione said, "I probably do." She now looked at Harry carefully. "Harry, if one of us volunteered to go with someone that was safe and that you approved of, how would you feel about that?"

Harry felt confused and wondered if she was asking what he thought she was. "What do you mean?" he asked slowly.

"Since we know that Neville is trustworthy, what if you took Ginny and I asked him to take me. How would you feel about that?" Hermione asked meekly and held her breath as she waited, hoping Harry did not explode.

His doubt was confirmed, she had said what he thought, what he was afraid of. He ignored the question and went after the more important one. "Do you not like me anymore?" He tried to keep his voice level, but it betrayed him and wavered slightly.

Hermione had been afraid he would see it that way. None of them had any real dating experience, so doubts were easy. She instantly reached out and grabbed his hands. He tried to pull them back but she held on tightly. "I'll never leave you, Harry, never ever." He stopped trying to pull away, but he still looked like he did not believe

her. "Harry, I was only mentioning one possible way for both Ginny and me to go, but if you're uncomfortable in any way, we'll throw that idea out. It's gone, never to be considered again for any reason at any time." She felt her emotions churning and tears coming to her eyes; she hoped their relationship did not suffer because of what she had asked. "I love you Harry and you're my mate. I'll always be with you and no one else."

Harry relaxed more and finally nodded.

She could not take it anymore and launched herself at him. "I'm sorry, Harry. I wasn't trying to hurt you." She felt relieved when she felt his arms go around her and hold her tightly. He was not the scared little boy as he was when they first met, but he still was not fully healed from the Dursleys either. She would have to talk to Ginny about this later. When he loosened his grip, she did too and then kissed him on the cheek as she sat back up. He gave her a small smile, which made her feel normal again.

"What was your other idea?" Ginny quietly asked, as if afraid to speak in the looming silence after the awkward moment.

Harry looked at Hermione critically, as if afraid of getting burnt again.

Hermione did her best to give him a reassuring smile. "There probably will be no requirement to have a date to go, so you can take Ginny, who otherwise wouldn't be able to go. I can go by myself and then the three of us can spend time together and dance with each other as we like."

Harry thought about that and looked at Ginny to see what she thought. She had a hopeful look on her face. Hermione had a point. If the Ball was for fourth-years and up, Ginny could not go if he did not take her, and he did not want anyone else to take her. "I guess that would work," he conceded.

Ginny happily gave him a hug. "Thank you," she whispered to him. She let him go and then gave Hermione a hug and a "Thank you".

"Harry?" Hermione sounded unsure so Harry's head whipped around to look at her again. "I will abide by whatever decision you make, and I think Ginny will too, but you do have a question you have to think about."

"What?" he asked nervously, wondering what this one would be.

"Since you can only dance with one of us at a time, what do we do if someone else asks us to dance?" She heard him sigh and then saw him start to think very hard. "I mean, some people are a definite 'no'..."

"Like Malfoy, eww!" Ginny interjected.

Harry smiled, as did Hermione.

"Totally agree. There are others I'd also quickly reject, and I'd tell all the boys I don't really know very well 'no' as well. But again, what about someone who's your friend, Harry? What if Neville asked Ginny or me for one dance? What if Ron asks me for one dance? What if Dean asks Ginny for one dance?"

"Why would Dean ask Ginny?" Harry asked, wondering where she got that from.

She looked at Ginny and saw a tiny shake of her head. She agreed, some observations were best left alone. "I'm just grabbing at examples of guys you know, Harry." It was mostly true, but she and Ginny had noticed Dean giving the redhead the occasional thoughtful look this year. Fortunately, he was a fourteen year-old boy, and so he probably would not say anything too soon.

Harry leaned back in his chair. "Damn, you ask the hardest questions sometimes."

Hermione almost chastised him, but realized she probably needed to let that one slide. It was pretty mild - even her mother said it.

"I don't know. I've never tried to tell my friends what they can or can't do, but you're not just friends either - you're so much more." He paused for a moment. "As I can't be with both of you at once," he slowly said, thinking out loud, "I suppose it would be all right to dance with someone we all trust, as long as you think it's all right, too." He became more confident again. "I won't dance with any other girl," he declared, sounding more like his normal self. He looked at each of the girls.

"Ron wouldn't ask me and I wouldn't even if he did, because Malfoy would tease us mercilessly about that, even with it being innocent. Neville is the only one I'd trust," Ginny said, "but I think I'll turn him down if he asks me to dance. I really only want to dance with you, Harry," she told him lovingly.

He smiled and nodded his understanding, before turning to his other bond-mate.

Hermione considered how to answer the question. It would be hard to avoid trouble. She was looking at her hands in her lap as she said, "I agree that Neville is the only trustworthy one. If he asks me, I guess I'll leave it up to you, Harry. We're all friends so I know it wouldn't mean anything, but I don't want to hurt you either, Harry. I'd rather tell him 'no' if you're uncomfortable and risk hurting his feelings than hurt you." With her head still mostly down, she looked up with her eyes and saw him giving her a slight smile. She let out a breath she had not been aware she was holding.

"What about if Ron asks you?" Ginny asked her.

Oh Merlin, she thought. As calmly as she could, she said, "I hope you don't think badly of me, Ginny, but I'd rather not."

Ginny shrugged. "I don't, but why?"

"Because, while I know he's a friend, I'm not sure I can fully trust him during the Ball." She looked at Ginny, who sadly nodded.

"I understand and agree. You don't have the protection of being his sister like I do."

Harry glanced back and forth, wondering. It was as if they were speaking in code. "What are you talking about?"

"Ron is one of your friends, right?" Ginny asked while Hermione looked at her hands and kept quiet.

"Yeah, so?"

"You've also noticed that he has a tendency to sometimes speak without thinking about what he's saying, making those around him angry while he doesn't have a clue as to what's wrong?" Ginny asked delicately. When Harry said nothing, she tacked on, "Like he did in your first year? He almost did it again once last year before I stopped him. Then this summer, he came really close again when he asked why you didn't seem to like being around my mother. It was like he didn't see what else was going on right in front of him."

"I understand your examples. Are you suggesting he would say something he and Hermione would both regret, and there would be a big scene?" Harry asked bluntly.

Ginny bit her lip as she quickly decided what to say. "Yeah, that's probably a good way to put it," she said after a few seconds. For her brother's sake, it was probably best not to mention that he might do something that would cause a scene as well as cost the two boys

their friendship. Ron normally would not do anything to Hermione, but Ginny thought that a special occasion almost begged for a disaster. If Ron were to do something like try to kiss Hermione, she suspected Harry's reaction would be talked about for a long time. The look on Hermione's face told Ginny that she had the same concern. Fortunately, it looked like Harry was not "reading between the lines" in this conversation, otherwise, he would have become angry.

Harry finally nodded. "OK, I think I understand." He looked at Hermione. "I'll think about it and we'll talk before the Ball. Is that all right with you?"

"That's fine, Harry. I don't have a strong opinion on this, so whatever you want is all right with me. We... we do have to learn to work together," she told him.

He looked at her carefully for a moment. "You make it sound like you want to dance with him."

"No, no, not at all," Hermione quickly said, trying to prevent any misunderstandings. "Let's back up. I really don't care, either way." She looked him directly in the eyes. "You're the only one for me, Harry, but it's only practical to consider how the three of us have to be flexible, just like a normal couple has to be. It's just a little harder with three of us. That's all I meant, really." If they were only a couple of years older, this probably would not be a problem, she thought.

Harry looked at her for a moment, thinking about what she had said, and he had to agree. They were going to have to work together, the three of them. He gave her a smile and a quick kiss on the lips. When he heard a throat clearing, he smiled a little more and turned to give a quick kiss to the other girl. He stood and held out his arms and the girls stood and they shared a three-way hug. They were bond-mates for life.

The trio walked into the Great Hall with Neville accompanying them. Harry led the way to the Gryffindor table, looking around as he walked. Professor Flitwick and Hagrid had really done a marvellous job of decorating for Halloween. Harry took a seat, with Hermione on his left and Ginny on his right - as usual. Ron and the rest of his male dorm-mates sat across from them. The other female students of the fourth year sat to the left of Hermione.

Harry looked across the room and saw the Durmstrang students were already sitting at the Slytherin table. Their arrival on a boat rising out of the Black Lake yesterday had been really cool. Most amusingly, Ron had almost hyperventilated when he saw Viktor Krum, the Quidditch star they had seen at the World Cup, arrive with the other fifteen Durmstrang students. Harry thought the Quidditch star had been trying to hide as he walked with the others. Harry understood, he tried to hide from his fame too.

There was a small stir as the Beauxbatons students walked in and sat at the Ravenclaw table. Harry had to work hard to contain his laugh to only a grin as Ron's head almost twisted off as he swivelled to follow one of the French girls from the door to her seat. He supposed he should not tease his friend too much about it, as almost every boy in the room that was not staring at the girl was at least glancing at her. It had not taken long at the Welcoming feast for the two visiting schools last night for Hermione to work out that the girl with the silvery-blond hair was at least part Veela.

Harry leaned over to Ginny. "Your brother's so funny to watch sometimes."

Ginny gave him an almost predatory smile before she whispered back, "You keep on ignoring her and you may find yourself very lucky, Mr Potter."

He gave her a questioning look along with a lopsided grin, and she nodded ever so slightly as the tip of her tongue appeared and wet

her lips. He grinned even more and said, "Deal."

The sound of a knife hitting a goblet drew everyone's attention to the head table. Dumbledore stood and everyone became quiet. "Everyone, please tuck in and enjoy the meal. We shall have the drawing of the names for the Tournament contestants after everyone is filled." There were a few groans, but most students happily started reaching for the food that suddenly appeared.

The main topic at dinner was the Triwizard Tournament and who might get picked as the Hogwarts champion. The slight favourite was Roger Davies from Ravenclaw, although Cedric Diggory from Hufflepuff was a close second. Both were in seventh year. A more fun topic had been Fred and George Weasley's attempt to enter, and how the age line Dumbledore had created had tossed them back and put long white beards on them to show the infraction.

As dinner ended and most of the students were watching the head table, waiting for the main event of the evening, Dumbledore made a motion to Argus Filch the caretaker. The old caretaker left through the door to the room where the Goblet had been set up. A moment later, he returned, struggling to carry it. His return instantly quietened the whole room and all eyes were upon him. Filch set the Goblet at the front of the room and everyone turned in their seat to watch.

Harry turned and straddled the bench to see more comfortably. A moment later, he felt someone snuggle up behind him and place their chin on his right shoulder. With a smile he turned and saw Ginny's face right there. He smiled at her and looked back to the front, but not before seeing Ron giving them a slightly unhappy look.

Ginny had been a little more forward about small touches and gestures since school had started. They were the sort of things a girlfriend might do, but not everything a girlfriend did. To his credit, Ron had never said anything to Harry since the last time months ago when he had asked if Harry liked Ginny "in that way". Harry had

wondered if Ginny might have had a word with her brother about it in private, but if so, neither had mentioned it to him.

To Harry's amusement, Hermione had not changed much at all. She still sat very close to him on the couch when they were both reading, so their arms were touching, but that was about it. Hermione also did not mention anything to him about what Ginny was doing, but Harry had to assume the two girls had talked about it; Hermione would have had to have been blind not to see the change in Ginny's actions around him, and he knew Hermione was very observant.

He had seen just the two of them talking privately a number of times, most of which ended in embarrassed looks and giggles when he walked into the room. It did not take a genius to figure out they had been talking about him. He thought that was a bit unfair at times, but he decided it was best ignored and treated as "one of those girl things" he would never understand.

Dumbledore came out from behind the Head Table and stood next to the Goblet of Fire, the chooser of the champions.

"Welcome again to the Triwizard Tournament. I hope that besides being an interesting event, everyone here uses the time to get to know one another. This can be a time of making new friends and learning about other schools and cultures.

"Before the names come out, I feel I should introduce the judges for this tournament. Head of The Department for International Cooperation, and chief organizer for this Tournament, Mr Bartemius Crouch." Dumbledore held his hand out towards a thin man who stood to light applause.

Harry looked the man over carefully. He was the one who had sent Sirius to Azkaban without a trial. At the beginning of the summer, Crouch had been arrested for failing to follow the law in regards to Sirius's stay in Azkaban. The man had spent a week in a Ministry

holding cell while the charges against him were investigated and he had a trial. In the end, he and former Minister Bagnold had been found guilty of failing to follow the law, but because it was "war time", they had only been handed medium-sized fines. Bagnold was no longer in office, but Crouch had only received the fine and no other punishment. He had not even been sacked from his present job. Sirius had been livid for several days at that.

Dumbledore continued, "Head of The Department of Magical Games and Sports, Mr Ludo Bagman." A portly man with blond thinning hair stood and waved as he smiled broadly. He was a famous former Quidditch star who obviously enjoyed the attention of a crowd.

"The final three judges will be the heads of the three schools: Headmistress Olympe Maxime from Beauxbatons, Headmaster Igor Karkaroff from Durmstrang, and myself, Albus Dumbledore from Hogwarts." The crowd applauded politely.

Dumbledore pulled his watch out and looked at it for a moment before smiling. "Now for the moment you've all been waiting for." As he put his timepiece up, the Goblet of Fire sent up a few sparks to draw everyone's attention to it.

The Goblet brightened and started spewing many sparks out of the top. After a short moment, a piece of parchment was sent up into the air and the sparks died down to only a few random sputters. Dumbledore's hand snapped out and grabbed the fragment of parchment with ease. He looked at it and smiled. "From Beauxbatons," he paused for a few seconds, "Miss Fleur Delacour."

The pretty witch with silvery-blond hair stood in a very poised manner and walked to the front and stood next to her Headmistress as the crowd applauded.

When Dumbledore started to point towards a door on the side, Headmistress Maxime quickly spoke up. "We'll wait for a moment to

see the drawing of the other champions."

Dumbledore calmly nodded, as if the change had been the original plan. The Goblet started spewing more sparks and everyone returned their attention to the artefact. Another piece of parchment was sent out and Dumbledore caught it. He had to unfold this one. With a grandfatherly smile, he looked towards the Slytherin table and announced, "From Durmstrang ... Mr Viktor Krum." The crowd applauded as Krum shuffled to the front and stood next to Karkaroff.

After a few seconds, the sparks started to spew and the third parchment was expelled. The Goblet went back to a neutral glow with only the occasional spark as Dumbledore grabbed the last contestant's entry out of the air. "And for Hogwarts..." He paused even more dramatically this time and looked around. His gaze around the room finally ended at the Hufflepuff table. "Mr Cedric Diggory."

Even the Slytherins were applauding for Diggory as he walked forward. He was one of those "nice guys" that everyone liked. Harry had guessed Davies would get picked, but he had nothing but respect for his fellow Seeker from Hufflepuff and he was genuinely happy for him.

As the applause died down, Dumbledore smiled and looked around the room again. "Well, we have our three Champions, who I'm sure will give us a good showing. The first task..." Dumbledore stopped and stared at the Goblet of Fire, like everyone else, because the Goblet had started burning brightly again and was spewing forth many sparks.

Like the other three times, it expelled a piece of parchment, which Dumbledore snagged out of the air. Unlike the other times, the sparks totally stopped and the glow from the Goblet slowly dimmed until it was barely visible.

Dumbledore looked down at the parchment in his hands and slowly unfolded it before he turned it around. He looked up with a slightly shocked expression and stared at the Gryffindor table. "Harry Potter."

Harry was shocked into silence, but almost no one else was. The Great Hall instantly erupted into pandemonium. He felt Ginny's chin leave his shoulder and saw Hermione turn and look at him, with both surprise and shock. Upon seeing his expression, her expression changed to one of concern and puzzlement. He turned and looked at Ginny. She kept glancing between him and the Goblet, as if trying to work out what had happened.

"Harry Potter, please come forth."

He turned back to the front as Dumbledore called his name. He saw that his dorm-mates looked upset, except for Neville, who looked almost as puzzled as Hermione.

"Mr Potter!" Dumbledore called.

Harry slowly stood and walked forward woodenly as his mind raced trying to figure out what was going on and what he was going to do about it. He knew he had not put his name in the Goblet.

"Mr Potter, if you join us in the trophy room. We need to discuss how your name came out of the Goblet of Fire." Dumbledore held out his hand in the direction of the door he had started to send Fleur Delacour to.

"Headmaster, I believe that discussion needs to take place here," Harry quickly said, not moving anywhere. He had learned a few things about Hogwarts in his three-and-a-bit years here. Rumours figuratively flew around the castle, and the rumours were almost always unkind to him.

"Harry," Dumbledore said in a softer voice, "I believe it would better

for this discussion to happen in private ... please." He waved his hand slightly towards the door.

Raising his voice slightly to be heard by everyone, although no-one was now talking so they could listen, Harry said, "Headmaster, I respectfully disagree. This concerns everyone in the school and the school should be privy to the investigation as to how my name was illegally entered." A low murmur rose in the crowd for a few seconds, until Dumbledore started to talk.

"Please follow us; this could take some time." Dumbledore again urged Harry to come with him. In fact, the Headmaster started turning to walk away, expecting the fourth year to follow him.

Wanting to stop as many problems as possible and remembering something Sirius had told him this summer, Harry quickly pulled out his wand and held it high, pointing straight up. "Ego fides. I, Harry James Potter..."

Dumbledore spun around so fast his robes rose six inches off the floor. "Harry! No!"

Harry looked at Dumbledore with determination and did not pause. "...do swear this Wizard's Oath on my magic, that I did not put my name into the Goblet of Fire, that I did not ask anyone to put my name into the Goblet of Fire, and at this moment I have no knowledge of how my name was placed into the Goblet of Fire; so I swear, Ego fides." After only a slight pause, Harry shouted, "Lumos!" The tip of his wand lit like a beacon. "Nox," he said quietly before putting his wand away.

"Do you realize what might have just happened?" Dumbledore said gravely.

"Completely. However, I believe I've also just put to rest any doubt about me putting my name into the Goblet," Harry declared with

confidence.

The murmurs came back strongly for a moment while Dumbledore took a deep breath.

"Headmaster, now that I've proven I do not belong in the Tournament, I assume my name will be removed from the list of contestants?" Harry looked at him expectantly.

Dumbledore turned slowly and looked at Crouch. Harry noticed that Bagman looked gleeful at the situation. Maxime and Karkaroff were glaring daggers at Dumbledore.

Crouch stepped forward. "I'm sorry, Mr Potter, but because your name was issued by the Goblet of Fire, you are bound to compete in this Tournament just like the other three as it was defined and entered into the Goblet of Fire. It's the rules."

"That seems to settle it then," Bagman said loudly, still with a gleeful look.

Harry could hardly believe what he was hearing. "But, but surely there is a way I can be removed from the Tournament. I don't want to be in it." That started the murmurs again.

"Again, I'm sorry, Mr Potter," Crouch said in his normal solemn voice, "but the rules state that you may be excused from the Tournament only because of a medical injury suffered in the Tournament that prevents further involvement. You must compete or suffer the consequences of breaking a magical contract - which would be loss of your magic."

Harry had to bite his tongue to keep from saying something that would have landed him in a long detention. When he did not say anything more for a moment, Dumbledore waved him towards the room. Having nothing else to protest, Harry looked back at his

bond-mates and saw their sad but supportive looks. Now he shuffled as he walked towards the room Dumbledore was herding everyone into. Besides the judges and contestants, only McGonagall entered. Moody and Snape tried to enter, but McGonagall did not let them.

"Dumbledore, I demand the opportunity to enter another of my students," Karkaroff said after the door was closed.

"Oui!" Maxime chimed in.

"I'm sure you noticed the Goblet is no longer lit as it was when it was accepting names; it will stay as it is until the three predefined tasks are complete," Crouch answered. "Attempting to leave would also be futile, as your students would be in the same position as Mr Potter if they tried to leave."

"We will investigate what has happened, but it seems as if there will be four champions this time," Dumbledore said, effectively ending the argument.

"Very good then," Bagman spoke up, now that the problem was settled. "The first task will be on the twenty-fourth of November. It will test your bravery, courage, and quick thinking. As the rules plainly state, you may wear whatever non-magical clothing you deem appropriate; the only magical thing you may bring with you is your wand. Also, there is to be no help from any of the judges or the staff of any of the schools. Are there any questions?"

Harry looked around and the other three contestants were shaking their heads. "I would like a copy of the rules for the Tournament."

"I can give you a copy of the ones I have tomorrow," Dumbledore volunteered. Harry nodded.

"Since there are no other questions, I bid you all a good evening,"

Bagman told them with a smile.

"Students, if you would please return to your quarters," Dumbledore directed. "Everyone else, I believe we have a Goblet to investigate."

Harry walked back out into the Great Hall and was happy to see Hermione and Ginny waiting for him. Other than Flitwick and Vector standing near the Goblet, as if guarding it, the room was empty. Delacour and Krum had not spoken to him and had barely even looked at him; Harry could not really blame them.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked back to see Cedric giving him a grim smile. "Bad luck, Potter, but I do want you to know that I appreciate what you did earlier."

"Thanks, Diggory. Good luck in the Tournament; I truly hope you win."

"Thanks, Potter." The older boy clapped him on the shoulder again and walked off.

Harry walked over to the girls. Ginny threw herself at him and hugged him tightly. When she let go, Hermione hugged him too. "I'm sorry," she told him softly.

"Yeah, me too."

"What did they say?" Ginny asked as they started to walk to Gryffindor Tower.

"I have to compete and the first task is on the twenty-fourth," he told them sullenly.

"We can help you, you know, to train, right?" Hermione asked helpfully.

He nodded. "Yeah, the teachers can't help, at least not directly. If I asked how to learn a spell without telling them what it's for, I suppose that will be all right, but that's about it from them."

"Don't worry, Harry," Ginny assured him, "we'll be there every step of the way."

"Every step," Hermione echoed, sounding very determined.

Feeling a little better, he gave them each a small smile. "Thanks, I don't know what I'd do without either of you. Oh, and Dumbledore is supposed to give me a copy of the rules tomorrow. The three of us need to look over them to see what I can and can't do."

Hermione nodded. "We should also look to see if there is a loophole somewhere that you can take advantage of to get out of competing."

"That was one of the things I wanted to search for," Harry admitted as they walked.

"We should also write to our parents tonight," Hermione told him. "I think there is a good chance this might be in the newspaper tomorrow morning, and I'd hate to have them learn about it that way."

Harry gulped. "No, that would not be good." He looked at Ginny and then Hermione with an expression of a man having to do something he would rather not. "You know that this means that our promise about changing schools is even more important now. This is definitely big enough to count as 'something dangerous that should have been prevented' and will really upset our parents."

Ginny started to mutter.

"What?" Hermione snapped, not at all happy with the situation.

"I was expressing my anger at the situation; and no, you don't want to

know what I was saying," Ginny said darkly.

"It's all bloody Dumbledore's fault," Harry swore. To his surprise, Hermione did not reprimand him for his language.

They gave the password to the Fat Lady and walked into the common room of Gryffindor Tower. There was an impromptu party in progress and it was a noisy affair. Everyone cheered when Harry walked in.

It took nearly a full minute, but Harry finally got them calmed down enough he could talk. "Thank you for your support," he said with genuine appreciation for their show of support, "but as far as I'm concerned, Cedric is the real Hogwarts champion. Please support him." He gave a one last small smile of thanks to his bond-mates, who returned the look, and then he headed up to his dorm room.

Harry was glad he was alone for the moment. He changed into his pyjamas and slipped into bed and closed the curtains for privacy. Why did all the bad things seem to happen to him? He could come up with no answer for the question.

Hermione wrote a hasty letter to her parents, telling them the major facts, as well as saying they should be ready to change schools after this year. Taking Ginny with her for company to the Owlery, she gave the letter to Hedwig.

"Please take this to my parents as quickly as possible, Hedwig. Give it to them when the sun comes up." The owl hooted and the brunette watched the owl fly into the night.

"This whole Tournament really sucks," Ginny said.

Hermione had to agree. She also planned to do her best to keep her bond-mate alive. Damn that Dumbledore!

((A/N: The TwT is one of those canon events that's so big it really can't be ignored. As you can probably guess, based on previous chapters, it won't be fun to be Dumbledore next chapter. :))

Chapter 17 - Compromise

Emma Granger walked bleary-eyed into the kitchen to get a drink of water before she started her morning exercises. To her surprise, since Hermione had written to her only two days ago, Hedwig was sitting in the kitchen next to their family owl, apparently having arrived last night and come in through the special owl door Hermione had created.

Walking over, she petted Hedwig and removed the letter. As a reward, she pulled out an owl treat and gave it to the white owl, who accepted it gratefully. Then, just because, she gave their owl - Archimedes - some loving with attentive petting.

Opening the letter, she started reading it, each sentence shocking her a little more as well as making her angrier. She was fuming by the time she finished the letter. The fact that she would soon get something she had wanted for over a year meant nothing at the moment. If a certain old man was in her kitchen right now, she was sure he would not be able to walk away from her when she was finished "sharing her feelings" with him. The fact that she did not like to commit violence, while the contents of the letter inspired her to harm the Headmaster, made her that much angrier.

Grabbing a pen and some paper, she scribbled two hasty notes and gave them to Hedwig. "When you feel rested, please take this one to Hermione first, then the other to Headmaster Dumbledore." The owl immediately took off.

Writing another note, she gave it to Archimedes. "Please take this to Sirius Black." The tawny owl hooted and took off, flying out through the owl door.

Picking up Hermione's letter, she hurried upstairs and into the master bedroom. "Dan!"

"Wha-" he slurred as he suddenly sat up in bed, startled awake by his wife.

"Look at this!" she said angrily, thrusting the letter at him, her arm shaking with her swirling emotions.

Seeing the look on her face, he steeled himself and pulled the letter from her. He mumbled as he read, "... Dumbledore's protections didn't work ... Harry entered without his knowledge ... forced to compete or lose his magic ... he'll have to stay here all year ... we'll help him as much as we can ... will search the rules for a loophole ... will definitely keep our promise about Beauxbatons ... next year."

He looked up at his wife and was sure he looked as angry as she did. "That bloody bastard!"

"I've already sent a note to that bloody bastard to be here at eight tonight to discuss this. I've also sent a note to Sirius inviting him to dinner at six and then to stay for the evening."

"Yes, good idea. We can strategize with Sirius," he said approvingly, losing a little of his anger as a plan came together in his head.

"I've also sent a note back to Hermione to keep us informed, but it will probably be a few days before we hear from her."

Dan nodded. "You're probably right. She'll want to research the rules before she writes back." He stretched and swung his feet out of bed. "I'm glad Harry is in our life, but life - or fate - is really unkind to him."

"It is, isn't it?" She shook her head. "I'm going back down to exercise. I need to work some of my feelings off before we head to work."

Dan stood and gave his wife a hug. "We'll get through this somehow."

Going back downstairs, Emma saw an owl arrive, delivering the Daily

Prophet. She took the newspaper and opened it. There on the front page was a story about her Harry being picked as an unexpected Triwizard Tournament champion. She mentally promised Hermione an extra hug for sending the note, rather than letting her find out via the newspaper.

Damn that old man, she thought as she went to do her morning exercises.

Harry had barely sat down for breakfast when the Headmaster walked up to him. "Here are the rules, Harry. You can keep those." He handed a thin roll of parchment over. "Oh, you'll probably want to know that we found a Confundus charm on the Goblet of Fire. We believe that's what allowed your name to be entered and picked."

Harry slowly took the scroll. "Do you know who cast it?"

"No, I'm sorry we don't. There is so much magic on the Goblet that it was difficult to find that one extraneous spell, much less detect any sufficient magical residue to determine the caster. However, we are still investigating and hope to have an answer later. I shall inform you when we get more information."

"Uh, thank you." Harry was filled with disappointment as he watched the Headmaster walk to his place at the head table.

"What do you want to bet they don't find out who did this, or if he does, that you don't get told?" Ginny whispered to him.

Harry snorted. "No fair betting on sure things," he told her a little sarcastically.

Hermione relieved him of the rules so she could look at them as soon as she had a free moment.

Sirius Black Apparated to the Grangers' back garden, easily

guessing what this evening's discussion would be about. Between Emma's note about Harry needing his help and the article in the Daily Prophet this morning, there was no doubt in his mind what they wanted to discuss. He also fully expected Dumbledore, and possibly McGonagall too, to visit tonight.

He knocked on their back door to get Emma's attention so as not to scare her.

She waved him in. "Sirius, thank you so much for coming."

"It wasn't hard to guess why, and if you're feeling anything close to what I am, I want to be present to see the fireworks. I assume we'll have another visitor later?"

"I sent the Headmaster a note that I expected him here at eight."

"I can hardly wait," he said with an almost evil grin. "Where's Dan?"

"He mentioned something about giving his hunting rifle a good clean, but I believe he's really freshening up after work today. I generally don't believe in violence, but part of me right now wouldn't mind seeing if magic is really good enough to save a person from a gunshot at close range," she said a little venomously.

Sirius snorted. "While I am aware of guns, I've never seen one used so I can't comment. However, I'm very willing at the moment to turn a blind eye to Dan's experiment."

"Why thank you, Sirius," Dan said as he walked into the room, without a gun. His wife handed him a casserole dish to take to the dining room while she grabbed the drinks.

"This way," Emma called over her shoulder to Sirius.

After they each had served up their food, Emma looked at their guest.

"Hermione sent a letter this morning with some ... interesting facts." She pulled the paper out of her pocket and handed it over. She watched him read it, his face becoming grimmer as he went.

"That..." Sirius choked his words off and looked at Emma.

She and Dan laughed. "Don't worry, I'm sure we said worse when we read that this morning."

Sirius grinned at her and put the letter down. "I assume our present discussion is about what can be done?"

"Yes," he got in stereo.

"As you can see, unless Hermione finds a way to remove Harry from the Tournament, he's going to have to stay at Hogwarts, no matter how much all of us don't like it. However," Sirius gave one of his mischievous grins, "that doesn't mean that we can't use this to help Harry."

"How?" Dan asked. "Personally, I want to punch Dumbledore's lights out, but I can't think of a way to directly help Harry by doing that."

Sirius laughed. "I think you'd be joining a queue for that. Dumbledore may be well liked by many people, but he does have his enemies as well as those who do not think highly of him," he said a little aggressively. "One thing I can tell you, based on his past actions, is that Dumbledore wants Harry to be attending Hogwarts, and he wants that more than many other things. Can I assume that Harry and Hermione will not be attending Hogwarts after this year?"

"Definitely not! As you saw in that letter, they've even said they should be ready to transfer next year," Emma told him.

"Right, I thought that was what they were referring to, but I wasn't sure. So, we use Dumbledore's desire to our advantage. Even

though you have no plans to let your children go there again, you can still dangle that in front of him. If he does certain things and everything works out perfectly, you'll strongly consider changing your minds and let Harry go to Hogwarts next year."

Dan looked at his wife and they both chuckled. "I like it," he said. "So, what do we ask for?"

"First, we ask for a room for Harry to train in. Second," Sirius gave his biggest grin yet, "we ask for unlimited access to the Restricted Section of the library for your children."

"I understand a room to train in," Dan said, "but why the access to the library?"

"Because Harry's going to need all the help he can get, and Hermione, bless her genius little brain, can make use of the restricted materials to help Harry. Lastly, I happen to know that they plan on having a Yule Ball over Christmas and that they will cancel the Christmas trips home. So you want to ask for special permission for Harry, Hermione - oh, and don't forget Ginny - to come and visit you on Boxing Day, and to stay until the day before the Spring term starts. I will, of course, volunteer to help them travel from the school gates to your home and back again." Sirius looked very pleased with himself.

Dan and Emma looked at each other for a long moment. "I can't think of anything else."

"Me neither."

"There is one more thing you need to know," Sirius told them, suddenly very serious. "Albus Dumbledore knows a lot of things and a lot of magic. He can be very persuasive when he wants to be, and he definitely wants Harry to stay at Hogwarts for some reason. All of that means that he will use every tool short of magically compelling

you to make Harry stay. That definitely includes using Mind Magic against you."

"What?" They both looked horrified.

"That means that he will attempt to use a subtle magic to detect whether you are telling the truth or not, which includes being able to figure out if you are bluffing or truly mean what you say." Sirius was not going to mention reading their current thoughts; there was no need to frighten them that much. "That means you need to avoid looking him directly in the eye, and you need to honestly believe what you say. So, you need to believe that if he could make the rest of Harry's year perfectly safe, Harry would stay at Hogwarts."

"But..."

"Yes, but..." Sirius stopped Emma with a grin. "There is almost no hope of that happening given that Harry is in the Triwizard Tournament, but you must believe you'd let Harry stay if things went perfectly. Again, I don't believe that has chance in hell of happening, so it's a safe thing to believe."

Dan looked at him very thoughtfully. "But won't Dumbledore know that he can't promise that Harry will be perfectly safe?"

Sirius chuckled. "That's the great thing about Dumbledore. Over the years, he's come to believe what everyone says about him, that he's so great and can do anything. In the back of his mind, he'll know and even admit to you that he's not perfect, but on something like this that he really wants to get his way on, he'll believe that his scheme to make it work can not fail. So take a few minutes and work into your minds that you believe you could let Harry return if everything went perfectly. I'll take a few minutes to think about how to word it so Dumbledore will take the bait and yet can't get out of the agreement when he fails."

Dan and Emma nodded. The three sat quietly, taking a few minutes to work through their thoughts. Sirius also asked for some paper and a pen, knowing the Grangers did not keep parchment and quills. He wrote down his idea and looked it over, making a few small changes. He handed it to the Grangers.

"Ah," Emma said with a smile afterwards. "I can see how this would appeal to him, as you've described him."

"Sirius? I do have one other question."

"Go ahead, Dan."

"When you mentioned coming home after the Yule Ball, why did you suggest asking for Ginny to join them?"

The old Marauder chuckled. "Because I don't think I've ever seen them not be together when they could, so I was trying to avoid problems."

"What do you think is going on between them?" Emma asked. "I've never seen anything like it. It's like they're dating or something, but I've never seen anything more than hugs and the occasional chaste kiss on the cheek, plus they've been doing this since Hermione and Harry were in first year with Ginny joining a year later. That's too young for a relationship beyond friendship."

Sirius raked one hand through his hair and sighed deeply. Personally, he suspected something magical was happening or had already happened, but he did not feel he could say that without proof. "I'm not sure I can really say," he said slowly. "The easiest answer is the most obvious one. Harry has saved each of their lives and that has created a very special friendship. I've met Aurors - magical policemen - that went through some very traumatic things together in the last war. They never knew each other before they worked together, and after their shared experiences, they became closer than brothers." He

shrugged, not sure what else to say.

"Could magic cause something to happen between the three of them?" Dan asked.

Only years of being a Marauder allowed Sirius to shrug casually, as if the question were of no importance, as he could prove nothing and did not want to scare the Grangers. "Who can say? Magic is a wondrous thing and, according to the theory books, capable of many incredible things given enough power. If it will make you feel better, I can honestly say I've never heard of anything like this, not even any legends or fairy tales."

Both of the Grangers gave him a relieved look, which he mirrored, despite that fact that Sirius would not be surprised if someone told him that magic was doing something to those three teens to bring them closer together.

Dan, Emma, and Sirius sat in the Grangers' living room waiting. There was soft, soothing music playing in the brightly lit room, a nearby table held a teapot that was staying just below boiling on the heating pad, and Emma had her best tea available. It may not have been much, but it was her way of stating that they had the fine comforts of home without the need for magic.

As the grandfather clock struck eight, Sirius said, "Be prepared for him to bring Minerva McGonagall."

"Why would he?" Dan asked.

"Don't you feel a little less confrontational when you're dealing with someone you know and have a good relationship with?" Sirius asked with a grin. "Don't forget, Dumbledore's been dealing with politics for longer than I've been alive. He knows how to do the little things to help himself." He shrugged. "Of course, she might not be here, but be prepared for it."

"Is that along the lines of having you here to help us may make it harder for him?"

Sirius grinned. "Something like that, Dan, although I will say that it is truly hard to unsettle him. You probably don't realize it, but Albus Dumbledore is around one hundred and thirteen years old. He's seen about everything there is to see."

"But ... he doesn't look more than about seventy," Emma said.

"That's magic," Sirius said, his grin continuing. "Barring accidents or disease, your daughter should reach that age, or near it. And she'll also age very slowly. To put it in perspective for you, how old would you say Minerva McGonagall is?"

Emma paused to consider it. "Late forties or maybe fifty."

"To the best of my knowledge, I believe she was in school during the early years of World War Two, which would make her close to seventy now. To me, she's hardly changed at all in the twelve years I've been gone, and I wouldn't expect her appearance to change much for the next twenty years."

"That's amazing..." Emma sounded slightly shaky.

A knock sounded on the front door and Dan went to answer it. A moment later, Dan returned with a smile that was not entirely suppressed as he looked at Sirius. Behind him, Albus Dumbledore and Minerva McGonagall entered the room.

"Good evening, Mrs Granger." Dumbledore paused ever so slightly as he caught sight of Sirius. "And a good evening to you as well, Sirius. I'm surprised to see you here."

"Harry is my godson and I care very deeply for his well-being."

"Of course."

"Good evening, Mrs Granger, Sirius," McGonagall acknowledged them.

"Good evening, Professors. Would anyone like some tea?" Emma offered.

"Yes, please. Would you like me to heat it?" Dumbledore asked, starting to pull his wand out.

"No need," Emma said with a smile. "Our little hot plate here keeps the water at the perfect temperature." She supplied everyone with refreshments and then sat down, ready to make her feelings known.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Yes, well, we might as well get on with the main topic. As you know, Harry's name very unexpectedly came out of the Goblet of Fire last evening. It is the arbitrator and final judge of the Triwizard Tournament, at least in a manner of speaking. It is certainly the judge as far as who competes. When it chooses a name, it creates a magical binding with said champion such that they must actively participate. Unfortunately, if a champion changes his mind later, he can not get out of the requirement for active participation."

"And what about when someone's name comes out that never wanted to be in the Tournament to begin with?" Dan asked pointedly.

"I'm afraid," Dumbledore said a little slower, "that the Goblet of Fire can not distinguish such intentions. To it, a name entered is someone who will compete if chosen."

"Then you're saying that Harry has no recourse, no out, no way of avoiding this dangerous idiotic misbegotten competition?" Dan queried with some heat.

Dumbledore stiffened slightly. "I wouldn't put it quite that way, but you do have the essential fact correct."

"Then I wish to withdraw my son from your school immediately. That will stop this lunacy, will it not?" Dan saw both of the professors become uncomfortable now.

"No, Mr Granger," Dumbledore said firmly, "I'm afraid that's not possible and if you did, then Harry would lose his magic because the Tournament creates a magical contract and bond with the chosen champions. To break that magical contract is what would strip your son of his magic. I'm sad to say it, but it happened once about three hundred and fifty years ago when a champion backed out and refused to participate in one of the assigned tasks. He also died about three weeks later, because a magical person's body must have magic to survive."

Emma now entered the conversation, and she was angry. "So, for the third time, or perhaps fourth time depending on how one counts, my son's life is in danger because he is at your school. Please explain to me exactly how you are fulfilling one of your two main goals as a headmaster - that is keeping your students safe. Because to me, it looks like you are failing abysmally."

"You have my sincerest apologies, Mr and Mrs Granger," Dumbledore said solemnly. "I took precautions to prevent the younger students from entering, but my precautions were sabotaged and the enchantments on the Goblet of Fire were even tampered with."

"So once again, you have lax security at your school, although it's not a deadly magical beast this time." Emma looked at her husband.

"Our daughter will stay with our son to help protect him, but we want all of their school records and everything else required to transfer

them to another magical school as soon as this Tournament of yours has finished," Dan demanded.

"Mr and Mrs Granger, there is no need to be hasty over a minor problem..."

"Minor? Do you call being stripped of your magic minor?" Emma shouted at him, finally losing her cool. "If that's a minor problem to you, then Professor McGonagall, I request you remove the Headmaster's magic and let's see him deal with it to show us how minor it is."

Dan put his hand on his wife's arm to stop her, not that he really wanted to, but custom demanded that shouting should not happen. "Headmaster," he said into the following silence, "my apologies for the delivery, but I happen to fully agree with her point. If this is minor, then please give up your magic and demonstrate what my son would have to go through and how to have a long and normal life after that." Out of the corner of his eye, Dan noticed Sirius's mask break for the first time this evening as the man put his hand in front of his mouth to cover a nonexistent cough. He also noticed that McGonagall was staying very quiet and she did not look comfortable.

Dumbledore cleared his throat, "Are there any other questions I can answer for you before we leave?"

"Yes, Headmaster, you can answer the standing question. Can you show us how you give up your magic and have a normal life for years to come?" Dan did not back down.

"I'm afraid that's not possible..."

"Then you, sir," Dan said heatedly, "had better make sure my son finishes your damn Tournament as healthy as he is right now, because if you don't, I will take this matter to every court in the land to see that you are prosecuted to the fullest extent of every law

available and thrown into the darkest hole they can find. I don't care if I have to go to the Queen herself, I will see justice done."

"I understand your feelings, Mr Granger, I really do; however, the Statue of Secrecy on Magic will prevent you going to the Queen..."

"I don't particularly care about your secrecy, Headmaster, if you can't be bothered to keep my son safe. You created this mess; you will carry the blame for it."

"Nevertheless..."

"Nevertheless, Albus," Sirius suddenly spoke up, "I can and will pursue it through all magical courts, British and international, as required. If you fail to keep my godson safe, I will see your reputation ruined. Your legacy will be that you killed The-Boy-Who-Lived. I will walk every step of the way in this matter with Dan and Emma."

In the silence, Emma looked at the other teacher. "Professor McGonagall, I would like you to send us a copy of Harry and Hermione's current school records. We will need them when we talk with other schools about our children attending there next year, or at least I'm being hopeful they will be alive to do that, as the alternative is too horrible to contemplate."

"As you wish, I'll send a copy to you..."

Dumbledore held up a hand to stop his assistant. "Mr and Mrs Granger, I do apologize for my choice of words a few moments ago. You are quite right that this is not minor. I merely meant that this difficulty is not so large as to create problems that we can not surmount. Harry is a very resourceful young man and your daughter is a great help to him. I fully believe he will come through this Tournament with flying colours and perfectly healthy, just as he is now. Given that, I see no reason to remove him and your daughter from Hogwarts. I'm sure that next year will be just fine and without

difficulties again, like last year was."

"Despite your glib assurances, Headmaster, I see no reason to keep them there and every reason to remove them," Dan replied.

"Mr Granger, I can and will keep them safe." Dumbledore sighed. "Perhaps I should return to a question I asked a few years ago. At that time, I asked you what it would take for your children to stay at Hogwarts when we had a disagreement over Professor Snape. We reached an agreement and that has been going well, has it not?"

Dan and Emma both grudgingly nodded, although they were both surprised at the accuracy of Sirius's guess as to how this meeting would go.

"Then let me ask the same question again, as I believe I can make the situation better here as well. There are a few things I can not do, such as give Harry direct help with the Tournament, or have my staff help him directly. The rules of the Tournament forbid that. However, there are other things I could do to help keep Harry safe. So what do I need to do to ensure that your children return to Hogwarts next year?" The kind grandfatherly look was back as Dumbledore looked at each of them.

Sirius's advice about avoiding looking into the man's eyes suddenly hit them, so they looked at each other, as if debating on what to do.

"Harry's safety is paramount," Emma told him. "I would need assurances that he would be as healthy and safe at the end of the year as he is now, if I were to even consider my children returning next year."

"I understand and I think that's very reasonable," Dumbledore agreed easily.

"That means no life-and-death situations and no having to save other

people's lives, which pulls him into deadly situations. He, and my daughter too, will need to finish the year just like they started it, with no extra complications in their life."

"I understand, Mrs Granger," Dumbledore told her without apparent worry. "There will be some danger associated with the Tournament, but I feel relatively certain it will only be of the minor variety like cuts or a broken bone, all of which are easily fixed with an overnight stay in the care of our school nurse. The worst he could face would be magical exhaustion, which two to five days of rest will fix. Magical healing is very good and far in advance of the healing you're familiar with. So other than danger directly associated with the Tournament which he can not avoid, I can agree with that."

"Harry can't possibly protect himself unless he is well prepared," Dan said. "He will need a place to train and practice whatever he needs to practice for."

"That is also easily solved." Dumbledore turned to his assistant. "Professor McGonagall, there are several empty classrooms near Gryffindor Tower, are there not?"

"Yes, we could assign one for Harry's use. To be fair, we should offer the same to Cedric Diggory," she answered.

"You have a point. Please take care of a room for Harry and work with Professor Sprout on one for Mr Diggory." Dumbledore turned back to the Grangers with his usual smile.

"If you're going to expect Harry to keep up with older students, then he needs to have the knowledge to do so. My son and my daughter will require unrestricted access to the library," Emma demanded.

"Mrs Granger, there are some very dangerous books in our library, and some are restricted to the older students for a reason."

"Headmaster, you've put our son, and by extension our daughter, into the position of an older student. Therefore, I expect them to have all of the same resources, especially if they have to deal with the same problems while they are three years behind in their schooling," Emma said, not backing down.

They all sat there for a moment in silence. "It seems like a reasonable request to me and I believe Mr Potter and Miss Granger will hand the privilege responsibly," McGonagall said quietly.

Dumbledore did not look like he agreed, but he nodded. "Very well."

"If you do all of that, and Harry and Hermione finish the year like they are right now, then we will allow them to return to Hogwarts next year," Dan begrudgingly said.

"The children will be home for Christmas, will they not?" Emma suddenly asked.

"Actually, there is a Yule Ball on the evening of the twenty-fifth and Harry will be required to attend," Dumbledore informed them.

"But I can meet them at the gates and escort them home on the twenty-sixth as well as back again before the next term starts," Sirius said. "That would be my condition for this lunacy you're putting them through, Albus. Oh, and that includes Ginny Weasley too, since she is their best friend."

"That would require the Weasleys to give their permission," McGonagall pointed out.

"I'll secure that from Arthur and give it to you before then," Sirius agreed.

Dumbledore wondered yet again how he found himself in another one of these negotiations with the Grangers. He looked at Dan and

Emma. He could sense their reluctance to support their children returning to Hogwarts, but they also seemed hopeful. A brief Legilimency scan of Dan showed he thought their children would not be going to Hogwarts next year, but it was because he thought Dumbledore would fail to keep his end of the bargain. He gave them his patented smile. "Very well, I will agree to all of that, if you will agree to sending Harry and Hermione back to Hogwarts next year if I fulfil my part."

"We will," Dan said, a little forced and not in a friendly manner.

"Excellent, I'm glad we could find common ground. If there is nothing else of importance, I believe we should call this evening to a close. And thank you for the very fine tea, Mrs Granger." Dumbledore stood after a silent moment and McGonagall joined him.

"Thank you for coming, professors," Dan returned.

"Oh, if you would please give this to my daughter this evening?" Emma asked McGonagall as she pulled out a sealed envelope and held it out.

McGonagall took it. "I'll give it to her as soon as I return."

"I would also like a copy of the rules for the Tournament," Sirius requested.

"I will owl you a copy. If you don't mind, we'll leave from here?" Dumbledore asked. With agreement from Dan, the two Apparated away with soft cracks.

The three remaining in the Grangers' house practically wilted as the stress bled off.

"We did it," Emma said quietly.

"We did." Dan looked at Sirius. "You know, towards the end, there was a moment where I found myself thinking about Dumbledore not keeping his promise and the children not having to return next year while I was actively thinking about if there was anything we needed to talk to Minerva about."

Sirius frowned. "And that is why you don't look Albus in the eye. I'm sorry he did that to you."

"He would do that to anyone he wants?" Dan asked in outrage. "Aren't people's own thoughts private?"

"There is a defence, but it takes magic. I know it, although I'm not a master at it. But to answer your first question, he would tell you he doesn't do it all that often, but if the stakes are high enough, he would do it for the greater good. And no, before you ask, I don't know why he thinks having Harry go to Hogwarts is that important. I have a few clues, but they don't make sense to me."

"So now we just wait?" Emma asked.

"Well, I'll secure a permission note from Arthur for Ginny's Christmas visit when I see him at the Ministry tomorrow. Otherwise yes, about all you can do is wait, and write a letter to your children telling them what has been agreed to."

"Right." Emma took a deep breath and looked to be filled with purpose again as she got up to write a letter.

Dan stood and held his hand out to Sirius. "Thank you so very much. We would not have come out nearly as well without your help."

"It was my pleasure. We have a common interest." Sirius looked at the man carefully for a moment. "You're not James and Lily, but you're both a damn fine replacement and probably a better one than I could be. Thank you for caring for Harry." Sirius left with a faint crack

of his own.

The Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress had Apparated to the gates of Hogwarts and were walking back towards the school.

Minerva noticed that Albus had a smile firmly fixed on his face as they walked. "What do you find so amusing, Albus? It sounded like to me that they just told you that you are failing as a Headmaster."

"Oh, in a sense you're correct, but it really doesn't matter. When one looks at the bigger picture, I believe it will all work out just fine. Harry will remain here where I can guide him as needed, and that is as it should be. One must keep one's priorities in place and ignore the minor distractions."

"Albus, I believe you are forgetting the agreement you just made."

"No, not at all, Minerva. I suppose that is partly what I find so amusing. The Grangers seem to think that I will fail and they will be able to transfer their children anyway. However, I will not fail. The consequences would be unimaginable."

She gave it some thought, but could not come up with anything so earth-shattering should Harry Potter change schools, other than some embarrassment. "I'm sorry, but what would be so problematic if Mr Potter were not here?" She also thought his belief that he would not fail to be misplaced, but that was his opinion and he was entitled to it.

He glanced at her for a moment. "I believe Harry has a bigger role to play in our world than the average person. Voldemort picked him for a reason those thirteen years ago. The uncertainty is how that will play out in time, but I believe we will all be better off if he is here where we can help him grow into a fine young wizard."

Minerva thought that was a bit dubious, but she decided to keep that

opinion to herself. "I shall assign Mr Potter a training room that will open only to him and the staff, then I shall offer the same to Mr Diggory. I shall also give library passes to Mr Potter and Miss Granger. I believe that's all I need to do this evening?"

"Yes, that will be very helpful, Minerva. Thank you for coming with me, I believe your presence helped. Have a good evening."

"You're welcome. Have a pleasant evening," she returned. She was not so sure her presence had helped, but perhaps it had in ways she was unable to see.

She stopped by her office to prepare for her next task. Glancing at the clock, she saw that it was only a little after nine o'clock. She was slightly surprised, as the last hour had felt very long. McGonagall considered what she needed to say and do as she made her trek to the Gryffindor Tower. She also wondered if perhaps she should be more involved and stop by more often. As she made her way up the last set of stairs, she decided to bring that question up at the next meeting with her Prefects.

The Fat Lady smiled and opened her portrait for the teacher.

Inside, McGonagall looked around and saw most of her Gryffindors were studying, although a few were playing games. She hoped they were all caught up with their homework. It did not take but a quick moment for her to find the ones she was looking for, studying at a table. Again, it was the three of them together and no one else.

"Mr Potter, Miss Granger," she said as she approached them. All three at the table looked up at her in surprise. She pulled a letter out and held it out. "Miss Granger, your mother sends you this."

"Thank you, Professor."

"Also, if you two will come with me for a few minutes, we have

something to discuss." She looked at the third student. "I'm sorry, Miss Weasley, but this is only for the Grangers' children."

"I understand, Professor." Ginny looked at her bond-mates. "I'll watch your stuff while you're gone."

Harry and Hermione smiled at Ginny as they got up and left with their Head of House. McGonagall led them out of the common room and to a nearby classroom.

"Mr Potter, if you will put your hand on the door and hold it there please." When he did so, McGonagall pulled her wand out and silently cast a spell on the door. "Follow me, please." She opened the door and walked in. When the students were in, she closed the door. "The Headmaster and I had a meeting with your parents this evening, which I'm sure they will inform you about. One of the things we agreed upon was giving you a room to prepare for the tasks of the Triwizard Tournament. This room is now yours and it will only open for you, Mr Potter, and all of the professors. I hope I don't need to go into detail about how you are to use it wisely, not abuse this privilege and you are not to be here after curfew."

"No, Professor, I understand," he said quickly. It was easy to imagine Snape checking this room on his nightly rounds to try to catch them out of bounds. "Thank you, I believe this will be very helpful."

"You should thank your father, as it was his idea. Another agreement was that you would have unrestricted access to the library." She pulled out two passes and handed one to each student. "This should help you to research the knowledge you need to learn for the Tournament. Again, please do not abuse this, or it will be removed."

"Thank you very much, Professor," Hermione said breathlessly as she looked at the pass which she was holding gingerly as if it was the most precious thing in the world.

Harry smirked at his bond-mate. "Thank you, Professor."

"While I can't answer questions specifically about the Tournament, if you have general questions about magic, feel free to come and see me," she told them with a calculating look.

"I understand, and thank you again," Harry said.

McGonagall nodded. "Curfew is almost upon you, so please do not tarry long here. Have a good evening."

"Our own room," Harry said with a grin when they were alone.

"It's probably a good thing we're not two years older," Hermione said with a matching grin. "Still, I think this will be very helpful as we can learn new spells in here without hurting anyone else." She looked at the door. "I wish I could open the door without you being here, though."

"I have an idea." He led her over to the door and out of the room, closing it behind them. He tried the handle and found he could turn it easily. "You try," he said quietly, motioning to her. She tried and the handle refused to budge. "Now, think about your magic," he whispered to her, "and call it up, but think about pulling that magic from me and not your magical core."

"But why would..." She suddenly gasped. "You think it works by reading magical signatures?"

Harry shrugged. "Don't know, but it's worth a try."

Hermione tried and failed several times. As she was about to give up, she tried pulling harder, as if doing a Patronus spell. There was a clicking sound and she pulled the door open. "Brilliant," she told him and pulled him back into the room.

"What?" he asked just before she kissed him soundly. "Err, thanks," he said when he could talk again.

"I'll teach Ginny how to open the door later," she told him. "I wonder what's in the letter from Mum?" She pulled the latest letter out and opened.

"Well?" he asked after she looked like she had finished reading.

"Mum says they and Sirius are working to transfer us from Hogwarts and she'll send more information soon. She also said to carefully look at the rules, to try to use all of them to our advantage, even if you can't get out of having to compete."

He nodded. "It makes sense. A lot of Wizarding things seem to overlook the obvious, and maybe that will make the difference between staying safe and getting hurt."

"I agree. We'll look them over for that sort of thing as soon as we can." She put the letter up and then led them back to Gryffindor Tower.

Ginny was excited about the practice room and the library passes, even if she had to rely on one of the other two to get books for her. The thought of having a room only for them gave her another fun thought, one that created an impish grin.

The next morning, Archimedes flew to Hermione and brought her a letter.

"From Mum?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Hermione answered absently as she quickly read it. "It explains the meeting they had last night with the Headmaster." She handed it to him, and he handed it to Ginny when he was done with it.

"What do you think the odds are of him being able to keep his promises?" Ginny quietly asked.

"With my luck?" Harry asked with an amused snort. "About zero."

Hermione carefully folded the letter and put it away as she thought. "I think I have to agree with Mum. There are entirely too many opportunities for things to go wrong. All three of us need to study our French ... diligently."

A few days later, Archimedes delivered a package. Ginny was thrilled to see a permission note that allowed her to visit the Grangers during the Christmas holidays. Harry and Hermione found a folder for each of them which contained a copy of their school records, as well as a suggestion on how they might be useful. The only problem was that they had to convince Professor McGonagall to give Ginny a copy of her records.

Ginny solved that the next day after a half-hour conversation with her Head of House, where she convinced the professor to not tell her parents she was thinking of changing schools. McGonagall understood why, but wondered how Ginny would accomplish convincing her parents to agree.

For the next three weeks, Harry did his best to spend every extra minute he had learning new spells that might be useful. The problem was, they did not know what Harry would be facing. They also continued to work on their French lessons, although they did shorten them a little to make time for Harry's training, which the girls helped with.

To make matters worse, Gryffindor had a Quidditch game against Ravenclaw shortly before the first task. Angelina was most upset with Harry when he tried to come to only half the practices. They solved the problem by sending Ginny in his place. Angelina was less than

happy, but had to admit that Ginny did a reasonable job as Seeker and would probably have a good chance at beating Ravenclaw's Seeker, Cho Chang.

Equally problematic was the position of Keeper, now that Oliver Wood was no longer attending the school. Ron tried out, but Angelina gave the position to sixth year Cormac McLaggen, who did slightly better in tryouts.

Practices were hectic and Angelina almost broke her broom when she beat McLaggen with it at their first practice. The git kept trying to act like the captain and tell everyone what to do. After Angelina almost damaged her broom, she hexed him twice with strong stinging hexes that both came very close to his crotch. He finally shut up and became more focused on being a better Keeper.

The day of the Quidditch match was only a week and a half before the first task. After a meeting between Angelina, Harry, and Ginny, they decided that Harry would play. So Harry suited up and joined the team. Ginny suited up as well, in case she had to substitute for him for some reason. Hermione worried over both of them.

Harry was a little nervous that Viktor Krum was in the stands watching, but when the game started, he quickly forgot about the audience.

The Ravenclaw Keeper was better than McLaggen, but the Gryffindor Chasers had better teamwork and more shots on goal. It was only because of Angelina, Alicia, and Katie that the score stayed close. Chang followed Harry most of the time. She went after his first couple of feints at full speed until she realized what he was doing and stopped following him on dives, and that gave Harry an idea.

He continued to search for the Snitch and eventually found it. He started off like he was on another feint and Chang did not fly hard as she had not seen the Snitch. Harry changed directions at the last

moment and captured it easily. Gryffindor won 260-100.

When he reached the ground, Ginny was there first and gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. To keep up appearances, Hermione only gave him a hug. However, she also whispered, "I have something for you later." Harry grinned broadly.

After the rest of the team congratulated them, Cedric Diggory came over. In their game last month, the Hufflepuff Seeker had caught the Snitch, but Slytherin had still won the game.

"Good catch, Potter."

"Thanks, Diggory."

"I look forward to playing you in February. I'd like to see if I can beat you this time," Diggory said with an easy grin.

Harry chuckled because he had barely captured the Snitch before Diggory last year, when it was Diggory's first year to play. "You can try," he said good-naturedly.

To Harry surprise, Krum walked over. Delacour was not far behind.

"Good game, good catch," Krum said slowly in his thick accent. "How long you play?"

"Thanks," Harry said brightly. He tried to talk a little slower, but it was hard when he was still so excited. "This is my fourth year. I hope I'm as good as you are in three years."

Krum nodded. "You have chance. Your team play our team after Tournament?"

That surprised Harry. He looked around, but no professors were near. "Uh, sure, that would be fun."

"We talk later." Krum nodded and walked away.

Harry looked over to Delacour. She stood just far enough way to avoid being drawn into the conversation, but there was no doubt she had overheard the conversation with Krum. She gave him a sincere look and nodded before she left. Harry supposed he now had a little respect from those two. He hoped he did not lose it in the first task by performing badly.

Diggory gave Harry a smile. "Again, good game," the Hufflepuff said as he left.

"Blimey, you talked to Krum."

Harry almost laughed as he turned around and saw Ron standing behind him.

"Ron, if you practice a lot, maybe you can replace McLaggen and then talk to Krum yourself," Ginny said.

Ron got a very thoughtful on his face and then pointedly looked at her.

She rolled her eyes. "Of course I'll help, when I have time. I just don't know how much time I'll have."

"Thanks, Ginny," he said happily.

Harry smiled at Ginny and she returned it. Ron was so easy to please sometimes.

((A/N: I know, this chapter is a little shorter than my average, but I really have to break here. I hoped you like Dan and Emma here.))

Chapter 18 - Here Be Dragons

After the Quidditch game when Harry was cleaned up, the trio decided now was the time to take care of a little school business based on an idea Emma had suggested. As inconspicuously as possible, they walked around the school grounds as if they were enjoying the cool day until they came near the Beauxbatons carriage. Summoning his Gryffindor courage, Harry knocked on the door.

A moment later, the door opened and there stood Headmistress Maxime. She was very tall to begin with, and the carriage floor was three feet off the ground. The cumulative effect made the woman look like a small giant - literally. "May I help you, Mr Potter?"

"Err, yes ... yes you can," he said a little nervously. "We'd like to talk to you about your school, as well as, uh, possibly get your help on something else ... that's related to school as well," he quickly tacked the last part on.

She looked the three over for a brief moment. "Come in." She stood back so they would have room. Once they had climbed up the steps and entered a corridor so narrow that it did not allow them to pass her, she drew her wand and used a spell to close the door behind them, since she could not reach it with them in the way. "Follow me - please."

The carriage was not small on the outside, but the inside showed that space expansion charms had definitely been applied to it as the corridor was far longer than the length of the carriage. Inside, there were at least a dozen doors on each side.

The Headmistress led them to the room at the end of the corridor. It was a tidy room that seemed to be both a bedroom and an office. The bed was tilted up against the wall to save space and there was a painting on what would be the bottom of the bed to make the room a little nicer. There was the usual furniture around the edge of the room,

but a desk and two chairs took up most of the middle. The Headmistress conjured a third chair for them before she took a seat behind her desk.

"What can I do for you?" she asked with an accent, but one that was easier to understand than what they had heard in the Great Hall a week or so ago.

Harry took a deep breath before speaking. They had decided that he should be the main speaker. "Headmistress, we have had a number of difficulties here at Hogwarts and we are investigating transferring to another school. We wanted to know if you would allow us to come to Beauxbatons next year."

Maxime's eyebrows rose in surprise. "All three of you?"

"Yes, madame."

"While transfers have not happened in recent memory, they are possible." She looked at each of them for a few seconds, before returning her gaze to Harry. "Before we discuss your question, I would like you to answer one for me."

"If I can..."

She smiled. "I hope you can. Mr Potter, I saw your oath denying the entry of your name. It has been more than a week now. Have you learned any more information about how your name was entered?"

He could understand why she would ask, but suspected she was about to be disappointed. "I have not been told who entered my name, although I have been told someone put a Confundus charm on the Goblet of Fire so it would accept my entry. I doubt we'll learn anymore."

The Headmistress considered that. "I had heard that as well, but I

was hoping..." She waved the thought away after a short pause. "I can approve your transfer assuming you are able to meet the entrance requirements. Good grades are the most obvious requirement."

"We all have good grades," Hermione told her as she pulled out three folders. "Here is a copy of our records if you want to see."

"Please." Maxime took the folders and quickly skimmed the first one.

"Miss Granger, you rank first in your entire year and you are taking the academically challenging courses. Hmm, all positive comments from your teachers. Overall, very good." She put that folder down and opened the next, quickly skimming it.

"Mr Potter, you rank fifth in your entire year and you are also taking the challenging courses. The only negative mark I see here is from a Professor Snape, but there is a note from Professor McGonagall to discount that." She smiled at him. "Professor Snape's reputation precedes him, so you have no worry on that account, especially as Professor Tonks adds her own positive note." She put that folder down and opened the last.

"Miss Weasley, you also rank first in your entire year and you are taking mostly academically challenging courses. I think you will find Muggle Studies at Beauxbatons much more challenging than your class here."

"It is not a difficult course here, Headmistress," Ginny agreed, "but I've also been spending a lot of time at Hermione's house and with her family who are Muggles, so I have experience in the Muggle world."

"Then you may not have such a hard time adjusting." Maxime returned to the folder. "All the comments about you are very positive and a few of your professors note that you could probably move up to

the next year if that was allowed - very high praise." She looked at the girl carefully. "I assume that is because you study ahead with your friends?"

"Yes, Headmistress."

"I see." Maxim put the folder down on top of the other two. Hermione picked them back up and put them away. "Academically, I see no problem for any of you." She smiled and then started to talk in French. «Miss Granger. Do you speak French and how well do you speak it?»

Hermione wet her lips a little nervously before she slowly replied in the same language. «I can speak enough French for talking about common things. I have been taking lessons for more than one year and I am still learning. I read and write more than speaking. Some of magical terms are still a little hard, but I am getting more.»

Harry was surprised by her small mistakes, but assumed they were caused by nervousness.

Maxime looked at Harry. «Mr Potter, how would you answer my question?»

Harry replied in French as well, speaking a little faster than Hermione. «I do speak basic French. It has been fun to learn. I have been working very hard because I know I need it. Our tutor says I am doing well, but I also know I have much to learn before next year. I believe I will be ready.»

She smiled at him before looking to Ginny. «Miss Weasley, do you speak French?»

Ginny smiled at her and spoke at almost normal speed. «Yes, I speak French, and I have enjoyed learning it very much. It has been a good surprise to find that it has been easy to learn. French poetry has

been my favourite thing to read. I also know that I have much to learn. Like Hermione, I find the magical words to be the hardest because I want to think of them in English. I speak French better than I read and write it.»

The Headmistress switched back to English. "Very good, all of you. You have a good start, but you will find it very difficult in school if you do not learn the magical terms very quickly. As you are now, I'm not sure it would be good for me to admit you as your limited French skill may make it very difficult."

"Headmistress, that was our other reason for coming to see you. We wanted to know if you could find a student who could tutor us. We will pay a reasonable rate," Harry told her. "Hermione's parents are also my guardians, and they hired a tutor for us during the summer holidays. That was very helpful and we'd like to have a tutor while we are here at school this year."

Maxime nodded slightly. "I think that would be very helpful." She considered the question more for a moment. "I can think of one or two students who might do it. A Sickle an hour and three hours of instruction per week... How does that sound?"

"Would that be each or for all of us?" Hermione asked.

"That would be for each of you. It is not that much if you do truly wish to do this, but enough money that your teacher would take you seriously." She looked at them, as if wanting to know just how serious they were.

Harry looked at Hermione and then at Ginny. Each nodded once, which he took to mean that they wanted to, but it was up to him. "We'll do it."

"Perhaps one hour in the evening during the week and two hours on Sunday afternoon?" Hermione suggested.

"That sounds reasonable and I will suggest it when I ask. Now, back to your earlier question. You said there were some difficulties here. Exactly why do you wish to transfer? I would like to know that you will not have the same problems at my school." Maxime asked and leaned forward slightly, placing her elbows on the desk and listening intently.

Harry sighed and hoped he could avoid most of the details. "It seems that every year, something happens to one or more of us," he said as he waved his hand to indicate the three of them, "that almost kills us. One year it was a troll in the school, the next year it was a basilisk, last year it was Dementors, this year it's the Triwizard Tournament. My parents, and now we ourselves, are tired of it. My parents want us to be safe while at school and that does not seem to be possible here."

The Headmistress's eyebrows had been rising slowly through Harry's speech and she was now sitting up very straight. "That's... And Dumbly-dorr is still 'Eadmaster?" she asked incredulously, her French accent suddenly becoming very strong in her surprise. She shook her large head several times as if unable to believe it all. Her speech went back to "normal" after she had taken a deep breath. "I understand why your parents would be upset. You have nothing to worry about at Beauxbatons. Nothing like that has ever happened at my school."

"That is very good to hear," Harry told her.

"It is unfortunate that I can not give you a tour of the school," the Headmistress said.

"Harry and I have already taken a small tour, last summer. The campus was very nice," Hermione told her.

"You have?" Maxime was surprised. "How did I not hear of it? Who

gave you the tour?"

"Professor Lamore, your History of Magic professor," Hermione answered. "She was the first person we ran into when we visited."

The Headmistress closed her eyes and wilted slightly. "If I were to pick people for you to meet, she would be the very last. You have my apologies. She is a very good teacher, but her..." Maxime waved her hand around as she searched for the right word, "personality is not the most friendly."

"She didn't seem very happy to talk to us," Harry said. "I also had the feeling that she ended the tour as quickly as possible."

"That is probably true." Maxime sighed. "I shall have to talk to her before you come. She is very biased against the English. Unlike how your Headmaster tolerates that sort of unprofessional behaviour from your Professor Snape, I do not tolerate that from my professors. Of course, this has not been a problem before now. I will correct that, one way or another."

"Thank you, Headmistress," Hermione told her, pleasantly surprised and pleased to hear of the Headmistress taking such an active role at her school.

"Do you have any other questions that must be answered now?"

"No, Headmistress," Harry replied.

"I shall search for your tutor and send her to you. We will talk again at the end of the year and see if you still wish to transfer, as well as assess your progress in learning French," she said with a smile.

"Thank you for your time," Harry said. The girls also said "thank you" before they left the carriage.

"I think that went fairly well," Harry said.

"If you don't count our French not being good enough," Hermione said somewhat disappointedly.

"But we showed that we had been working hard," Ginny said, "and she seemed pleased that we were actively trying to get better."

"True," Hermione agreed. "I'll write Mum and have her contact Maria and try to get her to tutor us again over the Christmas holidays - perhaps as many days as possible."

"Sounds like a plan," Harry said with a smile.

When the trio left dinner two days after talking to Madam Maxime, a short dark-haired girl with a Mediterranean complexion approached them. «Hello. Can we talk somewhere alone?» she said in French.

Harry was surprised. He had expected Madam Maxime to come and talk to them first. After taking a few seconds to recover, he replied softly, «Yes. Come with us.» He led the small group to a nearby classroom. Inside, Hermione put up privacy charms before the trio looked at the French girl.

She switched to English, in which her accent was noticeable but not strong. "I am Lucie Morel. Headmistress Maxime said you were looking for a tutor in French and were willing to pay."

"We are," Harry said with a nod. "We had agreed with the Headmistress on three Sickles for three hours a week for each of us. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that is what she told me."

Harry smiled. "You would teach me and my two best friends, Hermione and Ginny." He indicated each girl in turn.

"Hello," they said as he did so, and Lucie returned their greetings.

"The Headmistress said you already know some French. How much?"

"We have been tutored for the last two summers and we've been doing self study during the last school year and for the last few months. We understand many common words and can hold simple conversations. We can also read and write some. We need to learn enough to go to Beauxbatons next year."

Lucie raised both eyebrows in surprise. "That will be very hard. Perhaps if you lived with us and spoke nothing but French all day until then..." She thought about it. "I do not know if you can make it, but I will try very hard to make it so you can join us at Beauxbatons next year. You must practice as much as possible. Speak it to each other as much as you can. You must be able to think in French, like I am thinking in English now. It must be natural to you."

The trio looked at each other and nodded in mutual agreement. "We will," Harry told her.

"Good. Then I suggest Thursday immediately after dinner and Sunday immediately after lunch. You can follow me from the eating hall to our carriage. We will hold the lessons in my room. It will be a little crowded, but we will not be disturbed there, and I have my books there, too." Lucie thought for a moment. "We will start this Sunday. You will pay on Sundays. I will also give you work which you must complete. If you do not, I will stop the lessons."

"We understand," Hermione said. "We are serious about this and will do the work."

"Good. Then I will see you on Sunday." Lucie nodded good-bye and left.

The Saturday before the first task was a Hogsmeade weekend. All the fourth-year Gryffindors plus Ginny and Luna went together. A few would break off for a short while to visit a shop only they wanted, but they eventually came back together into a group. Harry and Hermione thought it had been a great trip. Ginny had thoroughly enjoyed her first official outing to Hogsmeade.

That evening as it was getting late and the common room was clearing out, Ginny went over to the big window to pull it closed, as it was starting to get quite cool outside. She looked out and saw spell flashes in the distance. She waved Harry and Hermione over.

"What do you suppose that is?" she asked.

Hermione looked out and noticed something. "Do you see that they are really coming from two different places? They're close together, but still different."

Harry looked out. "I think you're right. That one on the left is near Hagrid's hut, but the other is probably behind his hut and in the edge of the Forbidden Forest."

"I wonder..." Ginny stopped and looked at him. "Harry, I bet that's for the first task since it's in a few days. If you could go take a peek, you'd know how to prepare better."

"That's cheating, Ginny," Hermione said with indignation.

Ginny gave her sister-mate an "I can't believe it" look. "Hermione, that area is not far from the coach the French school is using. It's not that far from the lake either. I'd be willing to bet they've already had a look. So it's not cheating if everyone knows about it."

"Maybe," Hermione drawled as she thought about it. "However, you're making the assumption that the other schools do know, when

they might not."

"I'm with Ginny on this," Harry told them as he continued to watch the light show. "I'd bet they know." He started to grin. "Guard the window to keep the others away; I'll be right back." He dashed up the stairs to his dorm room before either of the girls could say anything.

"I hope he's not planning what I think he's planning," Hermione told Ginny quietly.

Ginny chuckled softly. "I think he's going to do exactly what you're thinking. I would if I were in his place."

Hermione just shook her head in long suffering.

Harry came back down a minute later, his Firebolt in hand. "I wish I could do the Disillusionment charm, but it's been too hard so far." He looked at Hermione.

"You know it's not for lack of trying. It's supposed to take a lot of power, so we may simply have to wait until next year to learn it," she told him.

He put a warming charm on himself and then looked at the girls. "Can one of you put a temporary charm on me to turn me completely black for an hour or two? I need it on my clothes and skin."

"I can do that," Hermione said, "although I do wish you wouldn't go."

"I need to know." He handed his glasses to Ginny and then held out his arms. Hermione pulled her wand out and cast the charm on him, waving her wand all over him as if directing spray paint. Harry closed his eyes and held his breath as she came up to his face. When she finished, he opened his eyes again, put his glasses back on, and looked down at himself. He was willing to bet he could stand in a shadow and be completely invisible. "Thanks! Oh, and this is

temporary, right?"

Hermione chuckled. "It's a little late to be asking, isn't it?" At his glare, she told him, "It should last an hour or two."

"Good, I shouldn't be gone more than half an hour or so." He opened the window just wide enough so he could crawl out.

"We'll be here," Ginny told him.

With a "Thanks" thrown over his shoulder, he jumped out the window, mounting the broom as he started to fall seven stories above the ground.

"I hate it when he does something like this," Hermione complained as Ginny closed the window and then took a seat in the wide window ledge. Hermione joined her.

"Why?" the redhead asked. "You know he's got to do this, and it's not even all that unsafe."

"I know, and that's part of the problem. I know he needs to do this, but I don't like it as we can't go too." Hermione looked really put out.

Ginny smiled and did not argue. In a way, she agreed, because she did not want Harry to get hurt. It would be too easy to run into something. On the other hand, while the moon was playing hide and seek with the clouds, it had been a full moon last night, so it was not completely dark out there even if the light was sometimes limited. She also wondered if the reason they had started the work tonight was because of the full moon last night. If they had started last night, they might have to also defend against werewolves.

The two girls talked about classes to pass the time, with Hermione remaining the more nervous of the two. Ginny asked her about her Ancient Runes class, since she was trying to stay a year ahead in

that class too.

About forty minutes later, there was a quiet tapping on the window. Despite the fact that she had been expecting it for the last twenty minutes or so, Hermione still jumped and did not scream only because she slapped her hand over her mouth. Ginny smirked at her and opened the window. Harry landed on the window ledge and crawled in. The only other people in the common room now were four seventh years, who were divided into two couples. They were so involved with snogging over by the fireplace that they paid no attention to the trio by the window.

Hermione pulled her wand out and cast a Finite on Harry to remove the camouflage rather than just wait for it to wear off. "Well?" she asked very quietly as she put her wand away. Ginny looked very anxious too.

Harry set his broom down and then sat on the window ledge next to Ginny. He also cast a privacy charm around them, having learned it from Hermione. "It looks like Flitwick and McGonagall are building something like a small stadium or maybe an outdoor theatre over near Hagrid's. It should seat everyone plus a few more."

"That will be where it's held then," Ginny offered.

"Yeah, I'd agree." He winked at Ginny and then looked at Hermione. "I saw Hagrid and Maxime taking a walk through the forest together, near all the excitement. I also saw Karkaroff sneaking away."

Ginny chuckled and Hermione looked down for a moment. "I never said I didn't make bad guesses."

Harry put one arm around her shoulders and hugged her to him. "No you haven't, and your guesses are usually better than everyone else's." She blushed a little but looked pleased.

"So what did you find at the other place?" Ginny asked with much curiosity.

He looked at her with amusement. "Remember Charlie saying that he might see us later this year?"

"Yeah. I assumed he meant at Christmas," Ginny replied.

"Perhaps, but he's here at Hogwarts right now." That got their attention. "There are four dragons in a clearing in the forest," he said far too calmly.

"No..." Hermione whispered hoarsely in horror as Ginny exclaimed "Bloody hell! That's not fair." Hermione did not say a word about Ginny's language.

"Yeah," Harry said quietly. "I almost fell off my broom when I saw them." He sighed. "I can't see Dumbledore requiring us to kill them, so I think I'll have to get past a dragon, or more likely get something the dragon is guarding."

"Charlie did say they like to guard shiny things," Ginny said, still having trouble believing what they were going to make Harry and the other champions do. "Do you have any idea how to get past one? Charlie also said it takes a team of handlers to stun a dragon."

"Not a clue," he said with a depressing sigh.

"That means we have a new research topic," Hermione announced, but not with her normal excitement. The thought of what might happen to Harry dampened her enthusiasm.

Harry thought for a moment. "You know, they said the staff can't help me, but they never said anything about other adults." The girls looked at him questioningly. "Sirius."

Ginny grinned. "Good one. Do you think McGonagall will let you talk with him?"

"I think so. I'll try tomorrow. For now, I think it's late enough to go to bed." Harry looked over and saw that the two couples were still oblivious to the world, so he leaned over and gave each of the girls a quick kiss on the lips. "Thanks for the help."

They each gave him a smile and a "Good-night", which Harry returned.

The next day, Harry talked to Professor McGonagall. She grudgingly let him go via the Floo network to visit Sirius for one hour, after she talked with his godfather and made him promise to keep to the time limit.

When Harry returned, he gave his Head of House a formal bow. "Thank you, Professor."

"Was it a successful visit?" she asked, looking over the top of her glasses at him, as if evaluating him.

"Yes, it was. The family matter has been resolved. Again, thank you," he said formally before he left. He considered that she might have thought he lied to her about visiting his godfather to resolve an urgent family matter. To him, it was not a lie. He had desperately needed to talk to someone to find a way to keep his future family alive. If that was not urgent, he did not know what was.

Near the Gryffindor common room, Harry entered his training room and saw his bond-mates waiting for him. He put a privacy spell over the door.

"Well?" Hermione asked anxiously. Ginny looked just as eager to hear what he had to say.

"He could only come up with two ways, and both of them involved injuring the dragon severely," Harry told them disappointedly. "I guess we're going to have to do this the hard way and come up with an idea on our own."

"To the library then, we have all day," Hermione said as she took down Harry's privacy spell and led them to her favourite room in the castle.

Harry considered that he need not panic yet. It was only Sunday morning and the task would be held on Thursday, so he had time to work out a plan.

On their way, he saw Cedric Diggory walking down the hall with Cho Chang. They were not holding hands, but he could see the interest each had for the other by their expressions and body language. He almost hated to do this, but Diggory would probably thank him in the end. "I'll meet you two in the library in a few minutes," Harry quietly told his girls. They saw Diggory and understood, so they gave him a nod and continued on.

Harry turned and walked towards the other Hogwarts champion. "Diggory, a moment for a word, if you please?"

If looks could kill, Chang would have slain him right there. She obviously had not wanted her time with Diggory interrupted.

Diggory whispered to her for a moment and she nodded unhappily before glaring at Harry again. The important thing was that she stood where she was as Diggory walked over to him.

"Err, sorry about ruining the moment," Harry apologized, "but I need to ask if you know what the first task is about."

Diggory's sense of fair play immediately made itself known. "Are you trying to cheat, Potter?" he asked with surprise in his voice.

"It's not cheating if everyone else already knows. I'm only asking to make sure you do know so you aren't the only one caught by surprise," Harry told him, ignoring the implied criticism from the older boy.

"And why do you think I'm the only one who doesn't know?" Diggory continued to stand on his moral high ground.

"Because when I found out, Maxime and Karkaroff were both there, so you can bet Delacour and Krum know." Harry tried to look as serious as he could. "Diggory, you need to know or you may get killed. I don't know if you've heard, but Hermione researched past tournaments and almost a quarter of all contestants have died."

"I have heard that others have died, but I didn't know it was that many," Diggory said with uncertainty, his firm stance wavering as he considered what Harry had said. "All right, what do I need to prepare for?" he finally asked.

Harry was relieved. He had no desire to see anyone killed or seriously hurt in this stupid Tournament. "If you knew where to look, you'd find a clearing in the forest with four dragons in it. I'll let your imagination take it from there. Mine's running wild right now."

Diggory swallowed hard as panic came to his eyes. After a moment, he softly said, "Thanks, Potter. I owe you one for that. It's Cedric." He stuck out his hand.

With a smile, Harry took it. "Feel free to call me Harry."

The Hufflepuff glanced back over his shoulder and saw Chang still scowling. "I better go, but thanks again - Harry."

"Anytime, and please give my apologies to Chang, but I thought you should know this as soon as possible."

Diggory chuckled. "I'll make sure she understands you are trying to help me stay alive." With a smile, he returned to the girl.

His good deed done, Harry turned and rounded the corner that was right behind him and almost knocked Professor Moody over.

"Professor, I'm sorry, I didn't see you."

The Professor waved the apology off. "That was a noble thing you did, Potter," he said, embarrassing the boy. His magical eye spun around for a few seconds. "I take it you don't have a strategy yet?"

"No, sir. I just found out last night and, well, it's pretty overwhelming at the moment," Harry honestly told him.

Moody nodded and motioned Harry down the corridor in the direction of the library. He stumped along slowly, making Harry shorten his steps to keep pace. "While I'm not supposed to help you, Potter, I will give you some advice. When you find yourself in a difficult situation, whenever possible, play to your strengths."

"My strengths, sir?"

"What do you do well, Potter?" Moody asked in his gravelly voice.

"Not much, Professor. I've got a few spells down that I can do almost without thinking, and I really like Quidditch." He was not sure what else to say.

The retired Auror grunted. "That's a good start. Think about that and see what you can come up with. Borrow, adapt, and conquer, Potter." He stopped at another crossing corridor. "I believe your young ladies went that way," he pointed towards the library. "Good luck."

"Thank you, sir." Harry went on his way, wondering what the old

Auror meant. What could Quidditch do against a dragon? Even a Beater Bat and a Bludger would not do a lot of good against the huge tough animal. The Dragon could breathe fire and fly... Harry stopped walking for a moment. A Dragon could fly, but so could he if he had a broom, and he thought he would be more manoeuvrable. He sighed and started walking again. The thought was all very well, but he could not bring a broom.

He found his bond-mates at a table and joined them. Ginny looked up from her book and raised an eyebrow.

"I told Diggory and he was grateful." He chuckled. "I also ran into Moody. He apparently overheard and thought I was noble, so he gave me some advice."

"What did he say?" Hermione asked as she flipped through a book, skimming it for something useful.

"He said I should play to my strengths, but I don't do much really well except for Quidditch and a few spells," he replied. "I considered that if I had a broom, I could fly like a dragon does and I'd be more manoeuvrable, which might help, but I can't bring a broom."

Hermione paused in her research and looked at him. "Harry, the rules said you couldn't bring anything magical but your wand, but that doesn't mean you can't create one or summon one."

"And you do summoning spells quite well, especially if I put your broom somewhere nearby," Ginny added with a big smile.

Harry saw a ray of hope for the first time since he had found out about the dragons and his smile was suitably wide. "Brilliant, both of you." They returned his grin.

"I think that should be 'Plan B', Harry. There's still a high degree of danger doing that and there may be a simpler way," Hermione

suggested.

"Maybe," Harry conceded, "but at least we have one way now." He grabbed a book from the stack Hermione had collected from the shelves and started searching for useful information himself, feeling a lot better than he had an hour ago.

After lunch, the trio saw Lucie get up from the Ravenclaw table and glance at them before she started to walk out of the Great Hall. The threesome quickly excused themselves, telling their friends they had to go do some spell research. They caught up with the French girl right outside the main doors to the castle.

As they started to enter the French carriage, the Beauxbatons champion - Fleur Delacour - was leaving. She looked at the three Hogwarts' student briefly before walking on, her glance landing on Harry only fractionally longer. Lucie led them into the second room on the right. She put locking and privacy charms on the door.

"So you know, I have promised Fleur that I will not talk to you about anything she says or does." Lucie looked very determined.

Harry nodded. "That is the way it should be. Of course, I would ask you not to talk to her about us. I don't believe anything about the Tournament will come up, but that only seems fair to me."

Lucie studied him for a moment before she gave him a single nod. "I agree. Business first." She held out her hand.

Understanding what she wanted, Harry pulled out his money sack and counted out nine Sickles on her hand, which she put on her desk. When she turned around, she had a small smile. "Our lesson will start now and go for the next two hours. There will be no more English - none."

Lucie picked a small stack of books up from her desk and handed the

first one to Harry. «Do you have one of these?» It was a French/English dictionary, except that it also had magical terms in it.

«Yes,» Hermione said. «But no magic words in ours.»

Lucie rolled her eyes. «Order one like this by owl and then give this back to me.» She handed the rest of the stack to Hermione. «Use these for practice. They were my books in first year. You will return them. Headmistress Maxime can help you order yours. Now we talk like in class...»

The next two hours went reasonably well for Ginny, a little less so for Harry, and very frustratingly so for Hermione. It seemed even worse when Lucie told them she was using only words that were used in first year classes at Beauxbatons. They felt they had a long way to go.

On Wednesday evening, Harry was about to lose it; he was quite sure of that. Their French lesson, which had been moved forward one day because of the first task, had not gone well because he could not keep his mind on what they were doing. His two best friends, his bond-mates, seemed to have an idea of what he was going through. So immediately after the lesson, each of them grabbed an arm and steered him out the front door of the carriage and headed for the lake, going the opposite way from the Durmstrang ship.

«What are you doing?» Harry asked as they walked him away from the castle.

«Harry, you're not helping yourself now,» Hermione told him.

«She's right,» Ginny agreed. «You need to relax.»

"Relax? Are you daft? How can I relax with what I have to do tomorrow?" He glared at the two of them, not even realizing he had

replied in English.

Ginny thumped him on his upper arm.

"Ouch! What was that for?" Harry rubbed his arm as Ginny glared at him.

"That was for calling me daft," she said pointedly.

"OK, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it literally, but I've got the first task tomorrow and there's a reasonable chance I'll get killed." The terror in his voice was obvious.

As they reached the lake, Hermione pulled him behind a large tree near the water. A quick check showed no one was visible, so she pulled him into a hug. «Harry, you have a plan and it's a good plan,» she assured him, trying to build some confidence in him. "You were just like this before most of your Quidditch games for the first couple of years, and yet, when the games started, you put it behind you and played very well. You'll do fine tomorrow."

Harry sighed and patted her back. «Thanks,» he told her quietly and let go. The trio continued walking around the lake, the sun not far over the mountains to the west. «I know you're trying to help, and I really appreciate it, but this Tournament is so ... big. You read what that Skeeter woman wrote about me after my name came out of the Goblet. She made up all kinds of cruel stuff about me.»

«Ignore her, Harry. Everyone here at school knows you weren't supposed to be in the Tournament and that you support Diggory,» Ginny reassured him. She stopped Harry and pulled him into an alcove of trees. Before Harry could do anything to stop her, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him thoroughly. When the two broke, all three of them were flushed.

"Uh, wow," Harry said softly.

«Don't forget that, Harry. That's what you have waiting on you when you finish the task. We'll go find somewhere private and spend some time, just like that,» Ginny told him with an impish grin.

«If that's not enough of a motivation...» Hermione stepped forward and put a hand on Ginny's shoulder. The redhead moved over casually to let Hermione take her place. «I'll make you the same promise, but only if you relax tonight.» Hermione leaned towards him and captured his lips in a soft but lingering kiss. «If it helps, think only of that for the rest of the evening.»

Harry gulped. He could not help but stare into the light brown eyes of the brunette in front of him, just like he had not been able to help staring into the chocolate brown eyes of the redhead. «Well, when you both put it that way...» With a grin, Harry quickly leaned forward and stole a kiss from Hermione.

Hermione was not fast enough to avoid him, but she pulled back as soon as she could. «No fair, Harry. That's your reward for being good now; you have to wait until tomorrow to collect.»

Harry did not get to retort because a high-pitched screeching interrupted them. The three stuck their heads out from among the trees and saw the top part of a Merperson in the lake shaking his trident at the giant squid.

"Now there's something you don't see every day. I think I've seen a Merperson only once before," Hermione commented, before turning back to Harry, who was still holding her.

"True, but who cares," Harry said as he pulled one arm from Hermione and waved Ginny over. The girl quickly stepped forward and they had a three-way hug. "Thank you, both of you." He placed a kiss on the cheek of each of them. "I know I was being a moody prat. Thanks for reminding me of what's important."

They both kissed one of his cheeks at the same time. "You're welcome," they said in stereo and they all laughed.

«We need to go in, the sun is going behind the mountain and it will be dark very soon,» Hermione pointed out.

Harry took a deep breath and grabbed one hand from each girl. With him in the middle, they started walking back towards the castle. «So, what do you think our OWLs might be like?» He hoped this topic could keep his brain off the first task tomorrow.

Hermione chattered for the next hour about the important exams she and Harry would be taking next year, and Ginny added multiple comments about what her much older brothers had said about them. Harry's mind was kept very busy until it was time to go to bed. Even though they occasionally lapsed into English, the trio worked on their French as much as they could in the conversation.

Harry's fears were rising to new heights as he had breakfast. He only ate because Ginny practically force-fed him. His dorm-mates made fun of him for that, but he hardly even noticed their teasing. On the other side of him, Hermione was whispering the spells he would probably need today, reviewing them so he would not forget.

When the time arrived, Professor McGonagall came over and collected him and Cedric, escorting both boys from the Great Hall and out of the castle towards a large tent in the vicinity of Hagrid's hut. They walked silently and Harry noticed that Cedric looked as nervous as Harry himself felt. He did his best to remember Hermione's and Ginny's promises for afterwards to keep himself calm.

In the tent, he and Cedric saw Fleur and Viktor were already there, as was the reporter, Rita Skeeter. Skeeter saw Harry and zeroed in on him.

"Harry, how do you feel about this task today? Do you think you'll be able to keep up with the older students? Are you scared? Do you..."

"Silencio!" Harry softly cast at the reporter, having pulled his wand out while she hit him with the barrage of questions. With a restrained voice, he said, "Madam, you are not wanted here. Go ... away."

Skeeter looked outraged, and even more so when three pairs of hands started clapping. She turned and stomped out of the tent.

"Merci, 'Arry," Fleur said softly.

"Danke," Viktor half said, half grunted.

"And my thanks as well," Cedric added with a grin.

Harry gave them a lop-sided grin as the five judges came in.

"Good, you're all here on time," Crouch said as he opened the drawstring on a bag he was carrying. "Please reach into this bag and pull out one of the objects it contains. The number attached to your...object will determine your order of participation."

Fleur went first, and pulled out a miniature dragon about the size of her fist: it had a "1" on it. Krum pulled out the one with a "3" on it. Cedric pulled the "2". Harry pulled the last one with a "4" on it.

"As you can probably guess now, you'll be working with dragons for the task," Bagman said with far too much glee. "Each dragon is a nesting mother and has a clutch of eggs. Among the ivory-coloured real eggs is a fake egg that is golden. Your task will be to retrieve the golden egg and then leave the arena. You will be scored on a scale of zero through ten, with deductions for getting hurt, hurting the dragon, and for damaging her eggs. You must complete the task within one hour, or get a zero score. If you complete the task in less

than ten minutes, you can ensure a high score. If you do not complete the task by retrieving the egg, you will have difficulty preparing for the second task, as the egg contains a clue to help you. Are there any questions?"

All four students looked slightly sick, as if they wished they could be anywhere else. None of them said a word.

"Very good, then please come out when your name is called. Miss Delacour, you have a few minutes to prepare your strategy." Bagman turned and left, as did the other judges.

Fleur started pacing and mumbling to herself. The other three found chairs and sat. Harry was fidgeting, but forced himself to stay seated to conserve his energy. To stay calm, he closed his eyes and did his best to remember the kisses he had received last night, the soft lips, the warm and soft bodies pressed against him, the...

"Miss Fleur Delacour from Beauxbatons," Bagman's magically-enhanced voice called.

Harry looked up and watched the young witch stand a little straighter and walk out of the tent. He looked at the other two and saw that they had retreated back into their own world; Harry did the same. But Bagman's occasional comments that seeped in from outside from time to time made it hard for him to concentrate.

It took nearly twenty minutes, but they all heard Bagman scream, "She's done it! She has the golden egg!" His magically-loud voice carried into the tent. Lots of shouting and applause followed. A few minutes later, he heard a loud booing before Bagman said, "And that gives Miss Delacour a score of thirty-three." He did not sound entirely happy for some reason.

A moment later, Fleur came rushing back into the tent and into the other side. While this half of the tent had been for waiting, the other

half was for medical treatment. Harry noticed a burnt smell and did his best not to think about what that meant.

A few minutes later, Viktor Krum was called out. It was more of the same for Krum, except that he finished in twelve minutes. Bagman announced that he had received a score of forty. There was a slight booing as Krum gingerly walked back into the tent and disappeared into the medical area.

Harry looked at Cedric who could only shrug. When Cedric's name was called, Harry was able to offer nothing more than a rather weak "Good luck." His nerves were working overtime.

Cedric told him, "Thanks, good luck to you too, and be careful." Cedric's voice was louder, but there was still a touch of self-doubt in it.

Again, Harry did his best to think of Hermione and Ginny. Cedric finished near the fifteen-minute mark and received a score of thirty-eight. Harry was pleased for the Hufflepuff until he saw someone helping Cedric into the tent to see Madam Pomfrey. He was almost sick to his stomach at that point. He probably would have lost his breakfast if he had eaten a little more. Instead, he found some water and quickly drank it.

Suddenly, his name was called. Remembering Fleur and how she had looked like a champion as she left the tent, he stood as straight as he could and walked out. The wall of the arena stood twenty feet in front of him and he could see some rocks through the opening, as well as a huge dragon on the other side of the arena. As he walked to the edge of the arena, he saw the stands making a semi-circle around it and they were high for the audience's safety.

"Here's our fourth champion, Harry Potter. Mr Potter, your time begins - NOW!" Bagman's amplified voice shouted.

Harry quickly climbed the nearest rock to stand about four feet higher. He watched the dragon, a Hungarian Horntail if he remembered correctly, very carefully. The dragon watched him equally closely but did not move yet. He could see the golden egg now. With a flick of his wand, he silently tried a Summoning charm on the egg, but nothing happened. He would have tried to break the Anti-Summoning charm on it, but he had been unable to master that over the last five days.

"Looks like he tried something, perhaps summoning the egg, but that didn't work. Good try, Potter, but we thought of that," Bagman said jovially. He was more descriptive with Harry's work, since there were no others after him.

"Plan B then," Harry muttered to himself. Thinking very hard about snakes, he spoke in Parseltongue, "Do you understand me, O Great One?" He hoped the dragon was close enough to the snake family that he could talk to it and reason with it, but the dragon made no indication that it understood Harry's hissing. He had not amplified his talk, so the audience had not heard. It was possible the dragon had not heard either, but Harry was not going to remind everyone he could speak Parseltongue.

"It's now Plan C." He transfigured a rock near the dragon into a rabbit, but kept it the same size as the original rock. There was now a three-foot-tall bunny near the dragon's feet. Professor McGonagall had given him a few private Transfiguration lessons when he had asked her how to turn rocks into animals.

The dragon roared and breathed fire on the bunny, roasting it to a very burnt crisp.

"Oh, good try, Potter, but it doesn't appear to like large rabbits." Bagman's comment got a number of laughs.

Harry was not laughing. He had not accomplished this next spell well in practice, but he was willing to try now. Pulling up his magic, he

transfigured a rock farther from the dragon into a cow. The cow looked right, but did nothing other than stand there, so Harry had not done it completely correctly. However, for his purposes, it was exactly what was needed as the dragon moved towards the cow and bit its head off. The crowd screamed "Eww!" at the gross sight, but he was pleased. It kept the dragon busy eating the cow while he silently Summoned his Firebolt. Ginny was supposed to have hidden it on top of Hagrid's hut. He hoped it was there.

As the dragon finished off the cow, his broom arrived and he caught it with a smile.

"Oh, good show. Potter kept it busy with a cow while he summoned his broom. That is within the rules, ladies and gentleman. Let's see what he does with it."

Harry transfigured another "cow" a little farther away. The dragon went after it and stretched its chain that kept it confined to the arena almost to the chain's limit. Harry noticed that, even while eating, the dragon kept an eye on him.

He mounted his broom and started flying at medium speed for good manoeuvrability towards the eggs. The dragon roared, leaving the half-eaten cow to chase Harry and breathe fire at him. Harry pulled hard right to avoid the flames before circling around. He would have to get the dragon to one side and then very quickly come around and grab the egg, like it was a dropped Quaffle.

"Yes, I see, he's trying to lure it away so he can grab the egg. Can he do it?" Bagman asked rhetorically.

Harry flew around to the other side near the cow and the dragon chased him. As the dragon stretched the chain to capacity, Harry quickly switched directions. Unfortunately, the dragon moved faster than anticipated and lunged towards Harry. It flapped as it lunged and Harry heard the chain go taut and then snap, releasing the

dragon from its position. Another flap of the wings and it was coming after him.

Panicking, Harry pulled up towards the top of the wall, hoping he really was more manoeuvrable. Before he realized it, he was flying only a few feet over the crowd. Seeing the judges nearby, he turned slightly, heading right for the judges. A little payback for forcing him into this farce suited him just fine. He could have kicked Dumbledore's hat off as he flew by he was cutting it so close. As soon as he cleared the top of the stands, he shoved the nose of the broom down and pulled left hard.

He heard Bagman shout, "Look out! Everyone duck!" Waiting one more second, Harry pulled up and then hard left as he came back up to the top of the stands. Zooming back down over the crowd of students and towards the arena, he looked left and saw the tail of the dragon over the other side of the stands as well as a huge bluish shield in the area. Dumbledore was the only one standing and he had his arms raised with a wand in his right hand, so he must have cast it; but Harry returned his attention to his mission.

Dropping back into the arena, Harry braked as he approached the nest to lean over and scoop up the golden egg. Without waiting to see where the dragon was, he zipped across the arena and out the opening, landing at the entrance to the tent.

"He's done it! Potter has the egg! And ...yes, in only eight and a half minutes!"

Bagman had barely finished screaming his announcement when the dragon flew back into the arena to try to find Harry. As it did, ten Stunning spells flew towards the dragon from the ground to Harry's left, followed by a dozen more from the Hogwarts professors in the stands less than a second later. The dragon hit the arena floor in a belly flop, skidded to a halt, and did not move.

The applause was immense. Harry was not sure if the applause was for him or for the dragon getting stunned - either worked for him. He was just glad the stupid task was over.

"Mr Potter, if you'll come in here, I'll get you healed."

Harry turned to the school nurse with a smile. "There's nothing for you to do, Madam Pomfrey. I don't have a cut or a burn on me."

The nurse gave him a disbelieving look and did a diagnostic charm on him anyway. She looked amazed at him. "You really don't! Congratulations, Mr Potter."

"Mr Potter, if you'll come out for your scores?" Bagman called.

Harry walked out, still carrying his broom and the golden egg.

"Headmaster Karkaroff, if you'll score him first."

Harry was surprised at the scathing look Bagman gave the man. Karkaroff did not look happy either, but he used his wand to draw a fiery "4" in the air. The crowd booed and Bagman exclaimed, "A four? He did it in less than ten minutes and he wasn't hurt!"

"He made the dragon attack the crowd. Very bad!" the Durmstrang Headmaster shouted back. He had not used a Sonorus, but everyone heard him.

"It wasn't his fault the chain broke!" someone in the crowd yelled. Harry agreed, glad someone was sticking up for him.

"That is my score!" Karkaroff yelled back.

Headmistress Maxime harrumphed and drew a "10" as she shouted, "Perhaps this will balance it!" People cheered.

Dumbledore gave him a twinkling smile and a "10", as did Crouch.

Bagman glared at Karkaroff again and drew a "10" with his wand. "That gives Potter a score of forty-four and puts him in first place." The crowd cheered and Harry was happy with his score as well as very surprised he was in first place. "Champions, remember that your egg has a clue to help you with the second task, which will be on the twenty-fourth of February. Good luck with your eggs! Quietus."

The announcement was barely over when he saw his bond-mates sprinting towards him, hair flying behind them. Ginny actually got there first, skidding to a stop before she gave him a crushing hug. Hermione also gave him a hug that almost bruised ribs.

"I was so scared for you, Harry," she breathed in his ear before she let him go.

"But I made it," he pointed out with a grin. "Let's go see the others." He led them into the tent.

"Good job, Harry!" Cedric told him while sitting on a bed, his burned arm a sickening sight. "You didn't get touched at all, did you?"

"Nope. I had a close one, but I escaped. Will be you be all right?" he looked at all three of them.

"I'll be fine by tonight, I'm told," Cedric said with an easy grin. "This burn isn't as bad as it looks and my leg only has some deep bruises. Krum said his dragon hit him with his tail and busted a few ribs." The Bulgarian grunted. "I think Delacour got it the worst in burns. Madam Pomfrey says it'll be a few days before she's fully healed."

Harry noticed the girl was not facing him and she would not even look in his direction as she lay on her stomach on the bed. He also saw that the upper half of her robes were burned away with a nasty burn on her upper back, which was covered in burn salve. Her

beautiful hair had also been singed and partially burned away. It would only just touch her shoulders after it had been trimmed straight again, instead of going halfway down her back as before. He cringed, glad that was not him.

"I hope you feel better soon, all three of you," Harry called out. Cedric told him thanks and waved, while Krum grunted and nodded. Delacour just lay there, and since Harry could not see her face, he figured she must be unconscious. Nudging Hermione and Ginny to get their attention, he walked them out and back towards the castle, after everyone else.

"I thought I was going to die of fright, but you were incredible, Harry," Ginny told him as she grabbed his broom from him and then held his hand. He looked at Hermione to see if she was going to do something similar, but she only smiled and whispered, "Later."

Ron, Dean, Seamus, and Neville came running over and offered their congratulations. Luna sauntered over and also told him he did well.

In the Gryffindor Tower, a mini-party sprung up. Fred and George seemed to be behind it, but that did not stop anyone from joining in. Harry put his egg away, not wanting to deal with it at the moment. Everyone spent the afternoon joking, talking about what happened, and having fun.

After dinner, Hermione pulled Harry to their training room and put silencing and locking charms on the door so she could sit sideways on Harry's lap and give him his reward kisses. When she was through, she smirked at a glass-eyed Harry and opened the door. As she walked out, Ginny walked in and reapplied the two charms to the door. She then straddled his lap and gave him another dose of reward kisses. When her time was up, Hermione had to come and help Ginny guide Harry to his dorm room. He had forgotten about the Tournament and he was definitely feeling no pain.

(A/N: I let Viktor use German before the first task because I've always felt that Durmstrang is in Germany, even if the books don't tell us, and their classes would be in German. Also, I suspect far more people will know what 'Danke' means instead of the Bulgarian equivalent.)

Chapter 19 - Bad News and Good News

After the first task, Hermione let Harry have a day off from training, but when Saturday came she insisted they work on the clue. Harry grabbed the egg and the trio went to their training room to confer privately.

Hermione put a silencing charm on the door and nodded to Harry. He set the egg on a desk where they all looked at it. It was not too hard to figure out how to open it, so he did. However, the deafening screech which erupted caused him to shut it immediately.

"Ouch," Ginny said dryly, then shook her head as if to clear it.

«We're going to need to listen to more of it than a few seconds, Harry,» Hermione said, sounding slightly perturbed.

«Sure, whatever you want,» he told her as he pulled out his wand. He cast a Bubblehead charm on himself and then opened up the egg again. This time, the noise level was greatly reduced for him and he smiled. His smile widened when he felt a small pull on his magic, prompting him to look at Ginny, who now had a Bubblehead charm on herself too. She was looking at him with her own grin.

Hermione was still experiencing "the clue" at full volume. After about twenty seconds, she closed the egg. «Harry, does that sound familiar to you?» When he did not answer, she looked up from the egg to him, to see him grinning maniacally at Ginny, and her making faces at Harry. She backhanded him on the shoulder, not particularly gently.

He gave her a hurt look and rubbed his shoulder with his other hand. «Hey, what was that for?» he asked in a faint voice to her.

Hermione pulled her wand out and ended his charm. "It was because you were clowning around and ignoring me." She glared at Ginny too, causing the girl to end her own charm with a sheepish look. «Now, as

I asked before, does that sound familiar to you? I think I've heard that before somewhere.»

Harry thought about it. «Now that you mention it, yeah, it does. In fact, it sounded a little more recognisable with the Bubblehead charm on.»

"Oh?"

«Yes and I think we heard it recently, too,» Ginny added, furrowing her brow slightly.

They looked at each other for maybe half a minute before Ginny gasped suddenly. «I've got it!» The others looked at her expectantly. «That night before the first task, we were near the lake and we heard a screeching sound that was very similar.»

"The Merperson in the lake," Hermione said distractedly as she thought about it. «Maybe, but if so, that doesn't help us much unless we learn their language. I really don't think they would expect you to learn a new language just for this task.»

«Is there a temporary translation spell?» Harry asked, looking at Hermione. If anyone knew, he thought she would.

«I don't believe so, or we I would have expected Professor Flitwick to have mentioned it when I asked him about learning French quickly,» Hermione replied.

«Oh, right, I forgot,» Harry said disappointedly.

«It might be simpler than translating what it says,» Ginny said. When the other two looked at her, she said, «Merpeople live underwater and so they would talk underwater too, at least normally.»

"Brilliant, Ginny!" Hermione said enthusiastically. She whipped her wand back out and then stopped and sighed. «We really need more

experience with conjuration beyond the little Sirius showed us. I need a bucket.»

They looked around the room but no bucket was evident, nor was there anything shaped like one.

«Err, Hermione, we really don't have to conjure one,» Harry said. He pulled his wand out and concentrated while looking at a chair. He did the transfiguration spell and changed the chair into a medium-sized barrel.

«Good work, Harry.» Hermione pointed her wand at the barrel and cast, "Aguamenti". The others followed her example and soon they had the barrel mostly full.

Harry picked up the egg and lowered it into the water. When he opened the egg this time, it bubbled a little and produced faint music. He leaned over and put the side of his head in the water for a few seconds before he jerked it back up. "I hear words!"

"Yes!" Ginny hissed with a triumphant look.

Hermione looked very pleased as well. «Close it and then open it again with your ear in the water. Repeat what it says and I'll write it down.» She pulled out the little notebook and pen she carried everywhere. Harry obeyed and Hermione wrote, with Ginny double-checking.

They gathered around a desk and looked at Hermione's notebook.

"Come seek us where our voices sound,
We cannot sing above the ground,
And while you're searching, ponder this:
We've taken what you'll sorely miss,
An hour long you'll have to look,
And to recover what we took,

But past an hour - the prospect's black,
Too late, it's gone, it won't come back"
(Borrowed from "The Goblet of Fire", by JKR.)

"Right," Hermione said authoritatively. "If it's talking about the Merpeople, then the next task will probably be in the lake. The 'come seek us' and 'not above the ground' phrases, plus the word 'searching', back that up."

"Sounds like they'll take something of mine, and I'll have to retrieve it," Harry said in a distant way, thinking hard.

«I agree, but what would they take?» Ginny asked.

«I guess they could take most anything, but it says 'sorely miss', so it must be important and not something like a book,» he reasoned.

«What's important to you?» Hermione asked. Ginny looked at him too; each girl thinking with him.

«Well, they can't take my wand, I'll need that.» The girls nodded, as he thought some more. «There's my Invisibility Cloak from my father, but probably only Dumbledore knows about that. Oh, there's also the letter from my parents. I could play it safe and take both of those to Gringotts and put them in my vault at Christmas.»

Harry sat down. The girls joined him and Ginny bumped into him.

«Sorry,» she told him and gave him a teasing smile.

«You can bump into me anytime,» he teased her.

Ginny's expression became more teasing as well, but before she could say anything, Hermione gasped. "Of course!"

"What?" the other two asked.

"We're being too literal. They won't take an 'it'. They'll take a 'her', a person you'll sorely miss," Hermione explained.

"They wouldn't," Harry said with dread. "You could get hurt."

"Actually," Ginny said a little downcast, «they would as they don't see things like you do, and they don't take 'Harry Potter luck' into account.»

«What?» Harry asked, perplexed. «What do you mean my luck?»

«She means that you have bad things happen to you at times here at school. You always overcome them, Harry, but that does not discount the fact that bad things happen sometimes. You know, like fighting a troll and a basilisk,» Hermione pointed out.

Ginny looked down, looking a little afraid. «I like what's happened between us, but Hermione's right. It's been difficult at times, but we've made this work. What if something else happened and a third girl had to be rescued ... and bonded?»

Harry could tell that was her greatest fear about this. He pulled the redhead into a sideways hug. «Hey, there's no reason for that to happen.»

"But that Beauxbatons girl!" Ginny argued.

"She's a contestant and she's on her own," Harry said, trying to settle the girl's fear. He looked at Hermione and saw her looking concerned. «Hermione? Are you worried about this too?»

Hermione got up and moved to the other side of Ginny and hugged her. Ginny brightened a little, enjoying the comforting. «Ginny, I don't think you have anything to worry about. I believe Harry's right and we'll be fine. My concern is really for us. You do realize they'll try to

take either you or me as the person Harry will have to rescue.»

"No!" Harry shouted instantly, surprising them both. "No way, I won't allow it."

"But if they ask us to participate..."

"No, Hermione," he said forcefully, cutting her off. "You are not in the Tournament. You have no obligation to do anything, not even show up to watch it. I know you will come to see me, but I will not allow you to be in it. If my 'luck', as you called it, takes that moment to strike, it would kill me if something happened to either of you. I won't allow it no matter what they say."

«We need to stop them from using us,» Ginny said in the silence after Harry's declaration. «We'll each write to our parents. I'll write to my dad, and get him to write a note saying I'm not allowed to be in the Tournament. You can do the same, Hermione. That should stop Dumbledore from making us take part.»

«And we'll have them say how angry they'll be and what will happen if we're taken,» Hermione added, smiling again. «I know my parents will do it considering how upset they were when Harry's name came out of the Goblet.»

«Dumbledore was lucky they couldn't make a Howler,» Harry said with a grin. Each of the girls chuckled, as they envisioned what Dan and Emma had said. The trio were all anticipating a discussion about this during Christmas break.

Hermione's happy expression slowly faded. «Harry, even if they don't take us, they're going to take someone and you'll have to rescue them. What are you going to do?»

Harry considered that. «I wonder if my broom would fly underwater? I could summon it again and just fly down there,» he suggested.

«Good idea, but it won't work,» Ginny told him. «I once saw Charlie fall into the river back home when he had his broom in his hand. He tried to fly out of the water and the broom didn't work. He had a devil of a time trying to swim and not lose his broom. You can fly over water, but not in it. It's just the way the magic on the brooms work.»

"Hmm..." Harry thought some more before a smile slowly spread on his face. «Maybe Hermione is right and we need more experience in conjuring. I know I haven't done much with it, but maybe now is the time to really master it.»

«What are you thinking?» Hermione asked.

He gave them a rough overview, refining the idea a little as he explained it and had to think it through more thoroughly. He was pleased to hear that each of his bond-mates thought it was a reasonable idea and gave him a few suggestions to enhance it, which he quickly agreed with.

«I guess I need to experiment to learn parts of it.» Harry pulled out his wand and held it in front of him. "I need ten feet of rope." He thought about the last rope he had used, what it looked like, felt like, what it was made of. Sirius had stressed this required precise visualization.

Hoping for the best and with the image firmly in mind, he thought about his magic and pulled it up so it would be primed and ready. It was something they had learned over the summer when Sirius was teaching them new spells. They would pull on their magic and cause it to swell. That pulled a small amount of magic from his mates, but it was not normally enough to make them fall over or even show that anything unusual was happening. When his magic felt ready, Harry cast, "ProdidiRope". A ten-foot length of tan twisted half-inch rope appeared on the floor in front of Harry.

«Good work, Harry,» Hermione told him as she inspected the rope.

«I wonder how long conjured items last?» Harry asked, inspecting his rope as well.

«In theory, it's a function of the power of the caster. So the more power used, the longer it lasts, or so the book said,» Hermione explained, looking satisfied with his work. «But that's a good question because it wouldn't be good for you to use a conjured item during the task and have it disappear when you're under water so you drown or something else bad.»

«Try something else, Harry, like a piece of wood,» Ginny suggested.

Harry concentrated again, visualizing something like the wood on the back deck at the Grangers. He pulled at his magic and cast, "Prodidi Plank!" Exactly as he visualized, a plank six inches wide, one inch thick, and six feet long appeared on the floor in front of him.

He bent down and picked up the rope and handed one end to Ginny. They tugged on it and it acted like a real rope. He put it down and picked up one end of the board and dropped it. It stayed in one piece and sounded like a real board being dropped. With a grin, he stood back up. "I think I'm getting the feel for this."

With confidence, he tried to conjure a chair. "Prodidi Chair!" The result was wooden and somewhat chair-shaped, but he was sure the spindly thing would have collapsed instantly if he sat on it. With a flick of his wand, he Vanished the chair.

"Good try, but I think you need more work on complex objects," Hermione said.

"Yeah, I guess so, but fortunately, I don't need complex objects for the second task."

"And you have time to learn them if you did," Ginny pointed out.

"Still, I'm very impressed by how well you did that on your first try," Hermione told him, beaming. She gave him a hug for added reinforcement. "My turn to try."

Hermione took two tries before she managed to get the rope correct. Ginny took three tries, with a break after the second one to look at Harry's example closely. Harry had to encourage them to pull more power from him. Once they had done it correctly, they tried again and needed to pull a little less power. Each girl was very pleased and vowed to practice the skill on various simple objects and slowly progress to more complex objects.

«I guess the only remaining problem is where the Merpeople live in the lake,» Hermione said.

Ginny got a grin and said, «I have an idea for that. I should have an answer later today.» She knew exactly who to ask and also knew no one else would think to ask that person.

«Who?» Harry asked.

Ginny only smiled as she led them out of the room to go eat.

After lunch, each girl wrote a letter home. Ginny volunteered to mail the letters. When she finished, she joined Harry and Hermione in the library, where they were looking at books on conjuring for tips to do it better. "I found her," Ginny whispered, "and she said the Merpeople live in the deepest part of the lake. It will be a little past the middle and to the left of centre as you stand on the shore nearest the castle. She visited once."

"Who?" Harry asked.

Ginny giggled. "You really don't want to know, Harry." Hermione

raised both eyebrows but Ginny refused to answer in front of Harry.

Hermione's "anti-permission note" came back two days later, along with a letter for her and Harry. Dan and Emma were still upset at Harry being in the Tournament, and were even more so after they read in the Daily Prophet that Harry had had to face a dragon. The fact that he had succeeded without a scratch was the only thing that kept them close to calm. The Grangers also said they were looking forward to having their children home at Christmas.

It took three days for Mr Weasley to write back to Ginny, but she had her "anti-permission note" as well, along with a short letter. In the letter, he said that he hoped Ginny had a good Christmas at the Grangers and that he would miss seeing her.

At the end of the first week in December, Dumbledore got everyone's attention during the middle of dinner.

"Good evening. I hope everyone is enjoying the food this evening. To add to your dining conversation, I would like to announce that a Triwizard Tournament tradition will be continued this year. On Christmas, beginning at eight in the evening, we will hold a Yule Ball for those in fourth year and above. While dates are optional for most of you, I highly encourage you to find one as it will make the experience more enjoyable. Champions, you are required to attend and bring a date."

Many whispers and murmurs sprang up.

Harry turned to Hermione and whispered, "Good guess." She looked slightly smug.

"For those in third year and below, we will provide alternate activities; however, you may attend the Yule Ball if asked as a date of an older student. Dress robes will be required and there will be a Hogsmeade day the weekend before Christmas for those of you who need such

robes and did not bring them," Dumbledore announced.

Looking at Ginny, Harry saw her raise an eyebrow and he whispered, "Please?" That caused her to smile brightly and nod.

"Lastly, since one of the main aims of the Triwizard Tournament is to develop friendship between the schools, the Hogwarts Express will not be running during the holidays. That will give you a chance to make friendships with those from other schools during our time off from scholastic pursuits."

Murmurs sprang up again.

"However," Dumbledore spoke up a little louder to be heard, "since we recognize that some families may have made plans for the holidays, you may leave to visit your family on Boxing Day if you have a note from your parents. You must return on the first of January between noon and two in the afternoon. Please present your note to Professor McGonagall, who will inform you of the travelling times. You will also need to meet your family at the Leaky Cauldron and return from there as well.

"I hope you find the rest of your evening and your weekend to be pleasant and a little more exciting." Dumbledore sat down and a cacophony of voices broke out as everyone started discussing the news.

A sharp intake of breath caused Harry to look across the table and see Ron looking scared. He would have laughed at his friend, except that he considered he would probably feel the same way if he did not have built-in dates.

"Harry?" Hermione whispered.

"Your plan, Hermione, if you're still all right with it," he said softly and then watched her carefully to see if she had changed her mind.

"I still think it's the best way." She looked resolved, but he could see a little sadness in her eyes.

He leaned over to whisper very softly to her so no one else could hear. «I'll make it up to you. If you have a special request for that, let me know.»

She looked at him gratefully. «Thank you.»

"So you're taking Hermione, Harry?" Ron's voice asked from across the table.

Harry smiled. He understood why Ron had asked; he and Hermione had been whispering together. He glanced at Ginny and saw her shake her head ever so slightly. That surprised him, but he understood the message. "Don't know, Ron, I haven't decided who I'll ask yet."

"But..." Ron looked very puzzled. Neville was looking at Harry curiously too; he was also looking a little uncomfortable in general - as most of the boys were.

"We were discussing going home for the holiday," Harry simply explained.

"I wonder if we will," Ron muttered.

Ginny caught what her brother said and answered, "I got a letter from Dad the other day and he mentioned that we'd probably be here."

Ron nodded and went back to eating.

After dinner, Harry pulled Hermione and Ginny away while Ron was distracted by a conversation with Dean and Seamus.

«Ginny, why didn't you want me to say I was taking you to the Yule Ball?»

«Because I didn't want Ron to make a scene in the Great Hall,» she replied a little sadly.

Hermione looked surprised. «Do you really think he would have?»

Ginny nodded. «Perhaps I would have been pleasantly surprised as he wished me well, but I don't think so.» She turned to Harry. «Be sure you're in the common room and that I'm around when you tell him. That should limit the damage and I'll be there to help him from getting too far out of control.»

He was not sure what to think about that, but agreed with her plan.

Everyone who could go was in Hogsmeade on Friday the twenty-third. Even the students from the visiting schools seemed to be enjoying the all-magical village. Harry and his two bond-mates, as well as Ron and Neville, spent time together for the day.

As the day ended, they started walking back towards the school. Ginny looked at Hermione and Harry. They both nodded. She felt a little nervous, as so much could go wrong, but this had to be done and they really could not put it off any longer. The letter from Ginny's father that came with the permission to visit the Grangers said that she had to tell her brothers about her visit.

As expected, when asked a few days ago, the twins did not care if Ginny went to the Grangers. Now all she had to do was to tell Ron.

When they neared the front gate of the school, where the carriages were waiting to give them a ride to the front door, Ginny slowed her walking and walked next to Neville for a moment. She smiled at him and he smiled back.

He had very timidly asked her to the Ball and she had had to explain to him that she was already going with Harry. In an effort to be as nice as possible, she also explained that he would be the only other person she would want to go with otherwise.

"Neville," she softly said so as not to attract Ron's attention while he was talking to Harry, "I don't want to be rude, but could I ask you to go on back in a carriage? We need to have a family discussion and I thought the walk back would be a good time. I really don't think you want to be involved in this anyway."

He looked at Ron for a moment before he grinned at her. "I doubt I do. So am I riding back with Harry and Hermione?"

"Uh, I'm afraid I'm going to need them for moral support, and to stop me from doing anything too rash," she said with a weak smile. She hoped this conversation would not go too badly, but this was Ron they were discussing. Perhaps it was unfair to him, but she did not expect this conversation to go well by any means.

Neville chuckled. "All right, I understand. Should I have Madam Pomfrey waiting at the front door?" he teased.

Ginny's smile became a little more natural. "I don't think so, but if you hear where she is, that might be good information to know."

Neville grinned again. "Good luck then." He turned slightly and started walking a little faster, to put some distance between them.

Ron turned as well to follow their friend and to get to the carriages.

"Ron, will you walk back to the castle with me?" Ginny quickly asked.

Her brother stopped and looked at her. "Why? It's getting chilly and I'd like to get back." He started to walk towards the carriages again.

Ginny ran a few steps forward and latched onto his arm and guided him a little to the side and around the carriages. "Please, Ron. I need to talk to you, as your sister. I haven't been sure when a good time was, and well, I think now is it."

He looked at her and frowned a little, but he did walk with her. Ron also glanced over his shoulder and saw Harry and Hermione walking a few steps behind them. "What about them? Or is it not that private?"

She paused for a moment, considering how to answer. "It concerns them a little. I ... I was invited to go with them on Boxing Day and spend the time until New Year with them, at their house. I won't be here at school for the holidays."

Ron thought about that for a moment and his expression became darker. "So, are they your new family now? Are we not good enough for you?"

"It's not like that Ron," she said, working hard to contain her temper at his rejection. "They're my best friends and I enjoy spending time with them. I wrote to Dad and asked his permission. He said I could go, but he also said that I had to tell you boys. Fred and George didn't mind if I go," she argued.

He snorted. "They don't care about much other than themselves and their pranks."

"Ron, that's not true. They care about you, and me too. They've even been helping Harry with a few ideas for spells for the Tournament. They wouldn't do that or watch out for us if they didn't care."

Harry did his best to keep a neutral face when Ron looked belligerently over his shoulder at him. When Ron looked forward again, he looked at Hermione and saw the same concern on her face as he felt. He feared this conversation would not end well, just as

Ginny had expressed to them privately.

"Fine, if that's what you want, then go," Ron said shortly, almost rudely.

"I wasn't asking for permission, Ron, I was telling you so you'd know when I wasn't around," Ginny explained. "I need to tell you something else," she quickly said, before her brother could argue back. "I don't want you to be surprised when it happens, but I'm going to the Yule Ball with Harry."

Ron stopped and tried to quickly turn around. Ginny's hand on his arm slowed him, but he still angrily faced his dorm-mate. "Is there anything else you plan to do? You do everything and get anything that you want."

As calmly as he could, Harry replied, "I asked Ginny to the Ball because she's one of my best friends and because she wouldn't be able to go if I didn't escort her. Don't worry, Ron, I'll take good care of her and promise that nothing bad will happen to her, if there is any way I can prevent it."

Ron studied them for a moment. "I'd tell you to do whatever you want, but you seem to be doing that anyway," he angrily said before he jerked his arm out of Ginny's hand and quickly stomped the rest of the way to the castle.

The trio watched him go, each with a heavy heart.

«That could have gone better,» Ginny finally said.

«But it went better than I was imagining,» Harry replied. «I was sort of expecting him to draw his wand or to try and punch me. Maybe he is starting to grow up.»

«I think he doesn't understand you,» Hermione said. «You're growing

up and changing, Ginny, and that's upsetting him.»

"Maybe," she agreed as she started walking again. The other two joined her. «If so, then this summer's going to be a real problem when I change families.»

«Now there's an understatement if I ever heard one,» Harry teased. The girls grinned, happy for the humour.

Harry waited in the common room, not quite able to stand still. His dress robes were not comfortable and no amount of shifting seemed to be able to make them feel better.

He watched Parvati come down and meet up with Dean. He had to admit that she looked nice this evening. Seamus escorted Lavender, who also looked very fetching. Of course, every girl who came down looked extra nice. He could hardly wait to see his bond-mates.

Ron finally came down, but he barely spared a glance at Harry. Ron had not directly spoken to him since the walk back from Hogsmeade two days ago. He also had not spoken to Ginny either. He had spoken with Hermione exactly once. Ginny had asked Fred and George about Ron, but the twins said their brother had only said "I don't want to talk about anything" before walking off.

Harry considered that, for a number of months, he had treated Ron much like Dean or Seamus: being friendly but not really seeking him out to spend time with him. If he was honest with himself, Harry thought that he felt closer to Neville than he did to Ron. He wondered if this was the reason Ron was so upset with him, or if Ron was just "that way".

After Alicia and Angelina came down and met up with the Weasley twins, Hermione finally came down. Harry almost forgot to breathe as he watched her slow descent. She was captivating in her light blue dress robes and her hair pulled up on top of her head. Her smile at

him lit his heart and he was sure he had a goofy grin on his face.

He reached out and took her hands as she came near. «I have always thought you were pretty, but I was wrong.» As her smile started to falter, he said, «You are beautiful.»

Her smile not only lit back up, but became bigger. «Thank you, Harry. You're very handsome tonight as well.» She paused for a moment and glanced over her shoulder before she asked, «Are you ready for your date?» He nodded. She leaned over and whispered softly, «Then I present Mrs Ginevra Potter.»

Harry's eyes went wide and his mouth dropped open as he gaped at her.

Hermione used one finger to close his mouth and then turn his head towards the stairs to the girl's dorms. «She asked for that intro,» Hermione whispered. Harry's mouth started to drop again and Hermione was not sure Harry had even heard her.

He watched "little Ginny" walk slowly down the stairs in light-green strapless dress robes that clung to her, showing curves that he had not paid much attention to before. She was not large on top, but she had more than bumps and her waist and hips were definitely feminine. How had he not noticed how good she looked when they exercised?

Harry continued his inspection to see delicate pale shoulders and a slim neck. Her hair tumbled over those shoulders in large curls and waves. She seemed to glide over to him.

"Good evening, Harry. You look handsome tonight," Ginny purred.

Unable to do much, he nodded ever so slowly. A laugh to his left broke him out of his paralysis and caused him to look over at Hermione, who had one hand in front of her mouth and was quite

unsuccessful in holding the laughter in. A few giggles came from some of the younger girls behind them, watching all the older students, but Harry ignored them.

"I think you broke him, Ginny," the brunette said between guffaws.

He turned back to Ginny, who had an amused smile and was looking at him expectantly. «You're so beautiful,» he breathed. «I always thought you were pretty too, but it's like I've never seen you before either.» The words fell out of his mouth on their own; he hoped he was making sense because he was not sure his brain was working.

Ginny's smile grew. «Thank you, Harry. That's so sweet. Shall we go? You can't be late.»

"Uh, yeah, no wait!" He opened up his jacket and pulled out two small boxes. Pulling his wand out, he enlarged them. Neville had helped get these. In exchange, he had pointed his friend towards Padma for a date.

He opened the first box and pulled out a yellow rose with a short stem. He quickly pinned it on the top of Hermione's dress. She ooh'd and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, causing more giggles from the younger girls.

The second box contained a red rose. He started to pin it on Ginny's dress when he realized there was nothing to pin it on without his fingers going places they should not.

Ginny chuckled and took the rose from him. Holding her dress out just a little, she pinned the rose to the top hem, letting it rest above her left breast. "Thank you, Harry." She also gave him a kiss on the cheek before she grabbed his arm.

Taking her cue, Harry led them out the portrait hole, leaving multiple high-pitched sighs behind them. Hermione followed a few steps

behind to give them some illusion of it being a date.

He felt like he owned the world at the moment, going with the two most beautiful girls in the castle. That French Veela girl had nothing on his bond-mates, he thought.

"Ginny? Your dress robes look a lot like a Muggle dress. Why?" he asked, after spending a moment working up the courage.

His date chuckled. "Hermione said the same thing. The bottom portion is more flowing than Muggle dresses, I think, but I suppose you're right about the top part." Still with amused look, she said, "I can see the robe effects on yours, but yours also look a lot like some of the men's suits I saw in London over the summer."

He shrugged. "I suppose. I thought it looked a lot like a tuxedo with long tails. If I had a top hat and a cane, I'd be complete," he said with a grin. He glanced back and saw that Hermione was silently chuckling at his comment.

A few minutes later, they arrived at the Entrance Hall.

Professor McGonagall was waiting for them. "You're almost late, Mr Potter," she briskly said, before softening a bit. "You look lovely, Miss Weasley." She cleared her throat. "In a few minutes, I will announce each of you. Please enter and walk to the head table, which will be for the judges, champions, and each of your dates. Dancing will commence after dinner." She turned and left for a minute.

Harry looked around. He saw Cedric with Cho Chang. Viktor Krum was escorting Daphne Greengrass from Slytherin. He wondered if the Durmstrang student liked his dates to be a few years younger, because Krum had also asked Hermione to be his date. She had turned him down, like the two others who had asked her. Last was Fleur, who was with seventh-year Roger Davies from Ravenclaw. Davies seemed to be having trouble ignoring the Veela allure, which

Harry found amusing. He also thought that his earlier evaluation was correct: Ginny was prettier than Fleur.

McGonagall came back out. "The order will be Delacour, Krum, Diggory, and Potter." Walking back to the doorway, she cast a Sonorus and announced, "The Beauxbatons champion, Miss Fleur Delacour, escorted by Mr Roger Davies." There was polite applause as the couple walked inside. Krum moved to the front and Diggory walked up behind them.

Harry stayed where he was and whispered in Ginny's ear. "Walk out there like you're the prettiest girl here, because you are." She looked at him in amazement. "Even Fleur can't touch your beauty," he told her as Diggory and Chang were announced to slightly louder applause.

"Also a Hogwarts champion, Mr Harry Potter, escorting Miss Ginevra Weasley." McGonagall looked at them with a hint of pride.

Harry walked in slowly with Ginny gliding regally beside him. The applause was louder now that he was in the Great Hall and everyone seemed to be smiling at him and Ginny. Hermione was easily found and she seemed to be clapping the loudest. The walk felt like it took forever, but they finally made it to the head table and took the last two seats. Harry sat with Chang on his left, while Ginny sat with Crouch on her right.

Dumbledore was smiling at them all. "Good evening everyone. After you decide what you want from the menu in front of you, you need only tell your plate to order it."

After watching Dumbledore order, the rest did as well. Harry decided on the roast beef and Ginny ordered the roast lamb. Harry noticed that Chang ordered a vegetarian plate.

Polite and inconsequential conversation started haltingly. Ginny

stayed quiet and listened. None of it was very interesting, until she heard Bagman speak to Crouch in a voice that was not meant to carry, but did to her ear.

"Not feeling well, Barty? You don't look like you've been getting enough sleep."

Looking out of the corner of her eye, she saw Crouch hurriedly glance around. She made nodding notions towards Krum across the table, who was talking about his family.

"I haven't been," Crouch finally answered, so softly Ginny barely heard it. "I've been having to work long days, and then I've been coming home and spending a lot of time on ... family issues."

"Oh, since it's only you now, I didn't think you had that many demands on your time." Bagman paused and an amused tone entered his voice. "Oh, I understand. Everyone has needs."

"Not that," Crouch quickly said, glancing around again, seeming relieved that no one was paying attention to him. "I'm searching for some family."

Bagman coughed and then sounded very apologetic. "Right, sorry for jumping to conclusions. With your son gone, I understand. You do need an heir."

Crouch seemed to falter for a moment before he responded. "Exactly. So, do you expect the Quidditch League to expand and add more teams?"

Bagman was on the question like flies on dragon dung and Ginny tuned him out. Ron would have been hanging on every word, but Ginny did not like Bagman. To her, he came across as a blow-hard and had been far too excited to have Harry in the Tournament. Still, she wondered what Crouch was really doing since his behaviour

cried out that he was lying about something.

Before she knew it, dinner was over and Dumbledore was directing everyone to the side of the room as he made the tables move and create a dance floor. Harry led her out along with the other champions and their dates.

Harry looked down a couple of inches into her eyes. She loved looking into his eyes, that was her favourite activity behind holding and kissing him. The band started and they began a waltz. It was just like they danced at Sirius's house. She thought they moved very well together.

Meanwhile, Harry enjoyed holding Ginny in his arms and twirling her around the dance floor. She was so light and quick on her feet. The only thing better was holding her next to him and snogging her. He did his best to not think about what came after snogging and what they might be doing together in a few years. He was afraid that line of thought might cause him to stumble.

When the first song finished, a slightly faster song started and they continued to dance as other couples came out onto dance floor. By the end of the second song, he guided them over to the tables on the side where Hermione was sitting. He held out his hand as a help when Ginny sat, then moved the hand to Hermione, who blushed a little and grabbed it to stand. Harry started to dance with Hermione.

"You two looked so beautiful together," she told him.

He could not help his grin as he guided her around the dance floor, just like in practice. "Thank you. I'm sure you look just as good right now."

"Thank you, Harry, but I don't think so." Her smile faltered a little.

A sigh escaped him. "Hermione, you're very pretty and more

importantly, you're a wonderful person. Not counting me, you had three boys ask you to be their date, including an international Quidditch star. Doesn't that prove something to you?"

She blushed again and looked over his shoulder, following his lead by how he guided her with his hands. "One of those was Ron last night when he realized he still didn't have a date, and he only asked me because he suddenly realized that I'm a girl!"

He could not help his chuckle. "OK, Ron was a prat when he asked you to this dance, but I can vouch that he knew you were a girl long before yesterday." As the song wound down, he guided her back to the side. "And Hermione, you're prettier than Fleur tonight." She looked at him in disbelief, but he nodded and sat her down before taking Ginny's hand and pulling her back onto the dance floor.

"You're not going to get any rest this way, Harry," Ginny told him mischievously, holding his hand tightly as if to prevent him from getting away.

"I have two wonderful reasons to dance the whole night," he told her, meaning it.

The girls did give him a small break for a drink. They sat at a table with Neville and Padma.

"How's it going?" Harry asked his friend.

Neville looked a little embarrassed. "She's really great, but I can only dance the slow numbers with her. I, uh, I don't want to step on Padma's toes too much."

Harry looked over and saw that the Ravenclaw was talking excitedly with Hermione and Ginny. He suspected it was about him based on the glances in his direction, but decided he was better off not knowing. "Well, mate, you might want to try a Cushioning charm on

her toes then. It'd be worth a try."

Neville looked surprised and then happy. "That might work. Thanks!"

Harry was about to get up and pull Hermione back out on the floor when Ron walked up.

"Will you dance with me?" Ron asked Hermione.

Hermione looked shocked and as if she did not know what to say.

"Come on, Hermione. You didn't come with anyone, and you've been dancing with Potter and you're not his date." Ron continued to stare at her and held out his hand.

She glanced at Harry and drew strength from his look of support. Looking up at Ron, she slowly said, "I'm sorry, Ron. By my choice, I'm only dancing with one boy tonight."

His anger slowly started to build, but Ginny spoke up first. "Ron, all you can do is ask. Girls are allowed to say 'no' and you have to respect that. If you can't, then leave the Ball."

Ron glared at his sister for a moment before he gave an angry look at Harry and then stalked off towards the drink table.

"Merlin..." Harry tiredly exclaimed as he shook his head and exhaled.

"What's gotten into him?" Neville asked. "He's been..." he looked at Ginny apologetically, "sorry, but he's been a certifiable prat for the last few days."

"You don't have to apologize, and yes, he has been a prat," Ginny agreed. She wanted to say more, but did not want to bash her brother too much.

Hermione came to her rescue. "He hasn't been happy with a few things we've told him lately. I think he's feeling left out."

"And jealous," Ginny added. "He's always been the most jealous of all my brothers."

Neville nodded, not sure what else to do or say. Padma pretended to be very interested in her bracelet.

Harry stood and offered his hand to Hermione. "I believe it's your turn, my lady?"

Hermione smiled gratefully and took his hand.

As they walked off, Neville looked at Ginny. "It's probably not my place to ask, but how does it work with the three of you? You're his date tonight, but it looks like he brought Hermione, too."

Ginny thought Padma looked a little too interested in the question, but Neville deserved an answer. He was becoming a best friend.

"We're best friends and that's the way it will be for now. I'm sure time itself will work something out," she said vaguely.

Neville nodded, realizing he was not going to get more of an answer than that.

When nothing more was said for a moment, Ginny got a fun idea. She turned to Padma. "Why don't you take Neville outside for a few minutes and show him a dance step or two without the music. That might help him when you come back in."

Padma thought about that and a sly smile came over her, causing Neville's eyes to go wide. "Neville, let's go outside for a few minutes." She batted her eyes at him.

Ginny almost lost it when Neville's surprised look turned into a goofy happy look. She had to bite her tongue until the couple walked away, then she burst out laughing. Searching for Harry and Hermione helped to bring herself back under control. When she spotted them, she thought they looked so natural together.

Sighing, she thought about Harry and how she wanted to run her hands over his bare chest and back. This was not the first time for that thought and she began to wonder if this meant she was growing up or if there was something in the bond that was doing this to her. She was so lost in thought, she never noticed someone walking up to her.

"May I have this dance?" he asked politely.

Startled, Ginny looked up and saw a boy she thought was in Ravenclaw and in Harry's year. Donning as polite a look as she could, she said, "I'm sorry, but I'm only dancing with my date tonight."

He looked disappointed, but gave her a slight bow from the waist. "My loss I'm sure," he said before he turned and left.

The song ended a moment later and Harry returned and took Ginny out. He continued alternating for the rest of the evening.

When the Ball ended, Hermione led them back to the Gryffindor Tower, although she took a circuitous route. When they were alone and she passed one of the secret passages through the castle, she motioned them over.

"Ginny, will you guard the entrance for a moment? I need to talk to Harry and then I'll let him walk you back." She gave a pleading look to her sister mate.

Ginny quickly nodded, well aware of what Hermione was about to do. After all, she had been thinking about doing the same thing for half

the night.

Harry looked a bit bewildered when Hermione led him behind the tapestry and into the secret corridor. Ginny walked over and stood in an alcove with a suit of armour on the other side of the corridor. As she waited, she determined she was going to have to talk to Hermione about these feelings she was having. Hermione was nearly two calendar years older, so she should have a much better understanding regarding feelings towards boys.

About five minutes later, Hermione stuck her head out and looked around. She smiled brightly when she saw Ginny, coming the rest of the way out. When Ginny walked over, Hermione whispered, "Don't take too long to come back so you don't get into trouble."

"Right. We need to talk soon, too. I've got, err, some questions."

"Tomorrow night." Hermione leaned over and touched her cheek to Ginny's in a quick hug before walking away.

Ginny walked behind the tapestry and into the dim light that lit the secret passageway. Harry stood leaning against the wall with a very happy look on his face. She rushed over to him and pressed herself to him, enjoying the solidness of his body - the result of many hours of exercise. As he wrapped his arms around her, she put her hands on his chest and slowly slid them up until she got to his head. Threading her fingers into his hair, she pulled his face down slightly as she leaned up. The next few minutes passed in a passionate blur.

"I think we need to head back," Harry softly croaked, barely able to talk.

"Probably." Ginny kissed him once more before she pulled back.

"You're going to kill me that way one day, Ginny," he quietly but fervently told her.

Ginny took a deep and happy breath. "If so, I can't think of a better way to die," she said impishly.

Harry chuckled and led her out. Fortunately, the corridor was clear and they hurried back to their common room.

When they walked in, a yelling match greeted them. They were one of about a dozen couples in the room staring at Ron and Hermione screaming at each other. There were more people on each of the stairways watching too.

"Well, why wouldn't you?" Ron yelled. "You go out with him!"

"I told you before!" she returned. "You're not that kind of friend! Why are you doing this?"

"Oh, am I not good enough for you?" Ron pressed. "Do I need more money? Or do I need to get another girlfriend first so you can rule over her?"

Harry was so shocked he just stood there, not believing what he was hearing.

Hermione had no such problem, being in the middle of it. Her right hand came around quickly and slapped the left side of Ron's face so hard, he stumbled backwards in surprise, hit the side of a chair just above his knees, and fell backwards into the chair. The chair was also unexpected, causing him to twirl to his right and fall out of the front of the chair, landing on his chest and face.

"You bastard!" Hermione screamed before she turned and ran up the girl's stairs.

Hermione's exit kicked Harry into gear. Knowing he could not go up the stairs after her, he looked at Ginny. "Please go take care of her

since I can't."

"Right after I do something." Ginny pulled her wand as she marched over to Ron, who was pushing himself up off the floor. When he got to his knees, with his back to her, she reached down and grabbed his collar and yanked backward, so he was looking straight up at her angry face and her wand.

"Ronald Weasley," she said angrily and fiercely over his gurgling. "If you ever yell at her or say anything like that to her ever again, I swear, I'll cut your willie off and Vanish it. Chiroptera Mucosus!" She threw his head forward as little greenish gray bats came out of his nose and started attacking his face, causing him to give a little scream in pain.

Harry watched Ginny run up the stairs after Hermione to comfort her. He stood there for a few seconds in cold anger watching the boy he had thought was one of his better male friends. Deciding that he needed to be careful, lest he seriously injure him, Harry shot a full body bind at Ron before walking over. The little bats continued to claw at Ron's face, scratching him, and the redhead could not do a thing about it.

In a cold, quiet, and fierce voice, Harry said, "Ron ... if you ever do anything like that again to Hermione or Ginny, I swear I'll..."

A hand grabbed Harry's shoulder and pulled him back.

Harry looked back to see the seventh-year boy's Prefect.

"Potter, I know you're fightin' angry, but give it a rest until mornin'. Ya don't wanna be sayin' something you'll regret later."

After a long few seconds, Harry replied, "I can't imagine anything I'd regret at the moment. You better keep him away from me tonight."

"Aye, that I can do. I think a Cushionin' charm on my floor will do for

him tonight. Ya headin' home tomorrow, aren't ya?"

"Yeah."

"I'll keep 'im with me until ten. Go on now."

Harry nodded, but before he left, he shot a glaring look at Ron. "Never again - Weasley," he said venomously.

On the stairs, he saw the Weasley twins. They gave him sympathetic looks and a pat on the back, which he appreciated. He realized they could have held that against him.

He went up to his room upset that a wonderful evening had been ruined. Inside, Neville also gave him a sympathetic look. "Sorry, mate. I was up here and they were going at it before I could stop it. Didn't think stepping in afterward would do anything but make it worse ... and probably get me punched."

"Don't worry about it," he said tiredly. "It wasn't your fault. 'Night."

"'Night, Harry."

Harry got undressed and slipped into bed. As he lay there, with the last fifteen minutes of the evening churning in his head, he hoped he would be over this by the time he got back in the New Year. But even if he did, Harry knew he would never trust Ron the same way again. First the troll and now this; what would he do next time if given the chance? He did not think he wanted to find out.

It took a long time to get to sleep that night, even if the room was quieter without Ron's snores.

The next morning, Harry's alarm went off at half seven. He shut it off with a groan, being tired from the previous physically and emotionally exhausting day. As he went to the bathroom to get ready for the day,

he mentally thanked Hermione for making him pack yesterday. Once he was ready, he went downstairs and threw himself in a chair that faced the girl's stairs.

Since he was having trouble staying awake, he felt fortunate the girls came down soon after he did. He gave Ginny a thankful smile before he quickly gave Hermione a hug. "Are you doing all right this morning?" As he looked closer, he realized that Hermione did not look quite like her normal self. She was wearing more makeup than normal. Usually she wore just a touch.

"I'll be fine, as long as he stays away," she said sullenly.

Harry kept one arm around her shoulders and started walking her out of the common room and towards the Great Hall. "After you and Ginny left, McWilliams, the Prefect, told me he'd keep Ron in his room until ten. So as long as we make it to McGonagall's office by then, we won't have to see him until after we get back."

She nodded slowly. "Thanks, Harry."

He squeezed her shoulders a little in support. Looking the other way, he saw Ginny dutifully walking with them. "You all right this morning too?"

Ginny gave him a small but real smile. "I'm fine, other than wanting to hex my brother into little pieces. I think it will help all of us to get away from here for almost a week."

"I think you're right," he said as he reached out and squeezed her hand. She smiled gratefully, even if the show of concern was for only a moment.

They had breakfast in a mostly empty hall. The table with the most students was Ravenclaw, but that was because any from that house who were going home were to leave from between nine and ten.

Gryffindor was not scheduled until from ten to eleven. Harry hoped to be at McGonagall's office a little before ten.

No one said much during breakfast, so they ate quickly. That allowed them to return to Gryffindor Tower by nine. They grabbed their book bags, which were acting as their travel bags, and took a seat in front of the fire. There, they softly talked and just enjoyed the closeness of each other's company. Everyone left them alone, for which they were grateful.

At a quarter to ten, they picked up their bags and headed out. They found Professor McGonagall's office door open and walked in. She was sitting at her desk in front of her fireplace.

"Good morning," she said in her usual no-nonsense manner as she checked their names off her list and started writing on a small piece of parchment. "You're a few minutes early, but that shouldn't be a problem. Professor Flitwick is at the Leaky Cauldron and you must check in with him before you leave." She held out the small parchment to them.

Harry took it and saw that it had their names on it and her signature. "Thank you, Professor."

"Do not fail to remember that you must return to the Leaky Cauldron between noon and two in the afternoon on the first of January or you will be serving detention with me," she said as she fixed them all with a stern look.

"We understand, Professor. We'll be there," Harry assured her.

"Before you go, Potter, I understand there were spells cast in anger in the common room late last night." Her look made it very clear she wanted an explanation.

"Yes, Professor. I felt it best to put Ron into a full body-bind to prevent

further fighting. That was the only spell I cast." Harry did his best to give her a steady look, hoping for no punishment.

"I too cast a single spell at Ron, Professor," Ginny said in the long pause that followed. "I would appreciate it if you would consider it a family matter."

McGonagall's eyebrows rose almost to the top of her forehead. A "family matter" was something that was supposed to be ignored, as if the deed had happened at home. Ginny could only request that because Ron was her brother.

"I see," McGonagall said slowly. After a moment, she said, "Be that as it may, I still do not condone fighting of any sort in my house, particularly when spellcraft is involved. You must learn to settle your differences without physical acts. Five points each from Gryffindor for you, Mr Potter, and for you, Miss Weasley. Please try to find some peace in the holiday."

"Thank you, Professor," each student quietly said, glad they had not received a detention. They each took some Floo Powder from the jar that McGonagall held out and used it to leave the school.

At the Leaky Cauldron, they came out of the fireplace and saw Professor Flitwick. Harry handed the man the parchment.

Flitwick quickly read it. "Thank you, Mr Potter. A Happy Christmas and New Year to all three of you. Please don't forget to be here before two on the first of January."

"Thank you, and the same to you," Harry told him.

The trio went out the door and into Muggle London. To the right, they saw Dan and Emma standing in front of the bookstore, looking at the books in the window.

Despite being fifteen, Hermione ran over and cried, "Mum, Dad!" They turned and opened their arms, Emma hugging first. Harry walked faster than normal into Dan's arms first.

Ginny casually walked up behind them. She was surprised when Emma hugged her after Emma had finished hugging Harry. "How's my exercise partner?"

"Good. Harry and I have been exercising three mornings a week, but it will be fun to be back and doing exercises with you," Ginny told her. She looked up when Dan patted her lightly on the shoulder instead of hugging.

"Hello again, Ginny," Dan told her warmly. "All right everyone, let's go find the car." A few minutes later, Dan was taking them all home.

Emma twisted in her seat so she could talk to them as usual. Like the other times, she noticed that they sat in the same order. With an amused smile, she asked, "Do you always sit that way?"

"What?" Hermione asked, perplexed.

"Like that ... Harry is always in the middle, you're on his left and Ginny is on his right. You sit like that on the couch at home, too," she pointed out.

The three looked at each other and shrugged with an amused look. "I, err, I guess it just happens," Harry finally answered.

"All right," Emma drawled and looked at Dan. He gave her a "whatever" look, so she returned to the children. "So, tell me about this term."

Hermione took the lead. "The term went quite well, Mum, except for the obvious problem. We've learned a lot, Professor Snape has left us alone, the strange Professor Moody has turned out to be a

surprisingly good teacher if you ignore his gruffness, Harry didn't get hurt in the first task, we know what he's going to do for the second task, and our French lessons are going very well."

"I see." Emma looked out the window and gauged they had at least twenty more minutes before they got home. A glance at her husband showed him to be taking great care in the traffic which was heavier than normal. She did not know what to do now. The circumstances were not quite as she wanted them. She looked back to the back seat.

Hermione saw that her mother was uncomfortable and it was obvious it was not from what she had just said. Then she saw her mum glance at Ginny and she understood. "Mum, we know what you want to talk about and you can talk about it with all of us."

Emma's sight zeroed in on her daughter. She suppressed a sigh. If anyone would pick up on what was going on, it would be Hermione. The role reversal did not help the woman feel any more comfortable. "Hermione, now may not be the best time." How did she say this, she wondered.

"Mum, it's all right. We can talk about this with Ginny. She's our best friend and will continue to be so."

Harry took over where Hermione left off. "She's right, Mum. We're all best friends. Where one of us goes, we all go."

"I'm sorry, Harry, but it doesn't really work that way," Emma tried to explain. "Ginny's family may not see things the same way we do, and they may have a different decision for her." She tried to give a caring smile to the redheaded girl and was surprised to see a genuine smile coming back to her, as if Ginny was a lot more confident about all of this than she was.

"Don't worry, Mum, I can convince Mr Weasley if I need to," Harry

said confidently. "We'll cross that bridge if required."

Emma was not sure what to think of that. Then she remembered the conversation at the end of the summer where Harry said he could bring Ginny into his family. Emma thought she understood, but had some trouble accepting the Wizarding custom.

"Go ahead and ask, Mum," Hermione told her. "You may find that we think the same way you do."

"You might as well, dear," Dan Granger said.

Emma nodded. "Very well." She looked at all three of them and saw that they were all looking at her intently, but without any worry. "Dan and I are really worried about you staying at Hogwarts, and we want you to change after this year." There, she had actually said it for the first time and it was a relief to finally bring the subject up. Everyone had talked about this possibility, but no definite decisions had been made. She and Dan had tried to avoid pushing too much, but she felt it was time to be more direct.

Harry chuckled, surprising both adults. "See, that wasn't so hard, was it Mum?"

"But..." Emma started to argue, then realized he was teasing her.

"Actually, all three of us really agree, Mum. We weren't joking or only trying to make you feel better when we said we wanted to change schools as soon as we could in our letters," Hermione told her, shocking both of her parents as if reading their minds. "As the Headmaster explained to you, Harry has to continue in the Triwizard Tournament or suffer magical consequences. If not for that, we would be willing to change schools right now between terms."

"Just like that?" Dan asked as he pulled onto the major motorway.

"Yes, Dad. We would be sad to leave friends, professors, and the school we know behind, but as long as the three of us are together, we think we can handle it. But..." Hermione looked at Harry.

"But there's a slight problem," Harry quickly took up the argument. "I may need to stay here in Britain for the spring term. Do you remember us visiting the Ministry last Christmas?"

"Yes," Emma answered. Her husband nodded as he drove.

"We have a meeting with them tomorrow to find out the status of a project we're working on with them. I found out it wouldn't be best for me to leave until that project is done, and we're not sure when it will be done," Harry explained. "However, I have the hope it will be completed sometime this summer, or we hope to make arrangements with them to do things from elsewhere."

"And because Harry has to stay, we'll all stay," Ginny said. When Emma looked at her, Ginny smiled. "They are my best friends and I'd do anything to help them, as they'd do anything to help me."

"Why?" Dan asked. "Why is that project so important?"

Harry took a deep breath, not really wanting to say this, but he knew he had to. "The man who killed my birth parents, and who tried to kill me as a baby ... did some magic to sort of cheat death. A few of the Ministry officials and the Headmaster are letting us work with them, and we think we might have figured out what he did so we're trying our best to undo that." When Emma started to object, Harry quickly added, "They're doing the physical work, but we're helping with research and other easy parts. We have to do this right, or that Evil Wizard will fully return to life one day and restart his war. That's why life is difficult for me and why I have to stay at this time. Once that task is done, or they tell me I don't have to do anything else, we can definitely leave and change schools. We might be able to go sooner, but we'll have to talk to them first."

"Of course, we may not have to change schools once the Evil Wizard is dead," Hermione added. "Most of our problems should go away with him."

Emma slowly let out a long breath as she tried to come to grips with the bomb of information that had just been dropped on her. "Dan?" she said weakly.

"I have two questions," Dan said, as they sped down the road. "I noticed some uncertainty in your explanation, like: 'trying', 'most', 'believe'... Is the outcome not certain? And why are we just finding out about this?"

"There is some uncertainty because we're having to work a problem backwards, Dad," Hermione explained without hesitation. "However, we all believe we have the answer, it's just a matter of finding all the pieces and putting them together. We will be successful; the only real question is if we will finish our tasks before the Evil Wizard gets a body back to restart his war. If he gets his body back, then it makes it more difficult for us, but we can still win."

"I'm not sure how he can survive without a body, but I'll take that on faith that it's possible with magic. The rest of the explanation I understand. Now, why are we only just now finding out about this?" Dan asked sternly.

"Because it's a secret and we really shouldn't be telling you, but we can see that you need to know and it's highly unlikely the bad guys would come after you," at least at this time, Harry mentally added to himself, not wanting to scare his parents more. "The three of us talked about this and decided it would be for the best to tell you," Harry said evenly. He looked at Dan in the mirror as the man thought about it. Emma had turned around and was sitting with her head against the head rest while staring out the front window as if unable to believe it all.

"So you hadn't planned on telling us?" Dan asked.

Harry could tell his "father" was getting more upset. "Dad, please understand that no one else is supposed to know, because if that information reaches the wrong people, they might bring the Evil Wizard back faster and prevent us from stopping him. We're not helping beyond research and planning, but you can help even less and it would be hard for you to protect yourselves from them. We had also hoped that we'd have solved the mystery and taken care of him before you found out. We didn't want you to worry."

Dan did not say anything for a moment as he pulled off the motorway and into the area where they lived. When he could glance back, he saw the kids look at one another and shrug or make gestures, having a silent conversation. After a few minutes, he asked, "So, if you didn't have this task to do, you would change schools right now?"

"Yes, Dad." "Yes, Dad." "Yes."

"We would do our best to find a way to work on this project to defeat the Evil Wizard while at our new school," Harry added.

The fact that he got three affirmatives made him feel a little better, even if he still did not completely understand what was going on, nor how Ginny fit into the picture. "We don't like this, but it appears we can't do much about it."

"That's OK, we don't like it either and we want it to be over with as soon as possible," Harry said, surprising the adults.

"Will you at least keep us informed?" Dan asked, cooling off a little.

"When we can," Harry agreed. "We have a meeting at the Ministry tomorrow morning. After that, we may not know much more until

summer."

Dan turned onto their street. "I suppose that will have to do for now. Thank you for telling us."

"We're sorry we had to hold this back, Dad, but it is really, really secret. You can't tell anyone about this, not even Professor McGonagall when you meet with her," Hermione said, trying to impress upon him how special this was.

"I understand." Dan turned into their driveway and parked the car. "Please take your things in and unpack. If you could amuse yourselves for a bit, that would be helpful."

"Of course, Dad." Hermione took the keys from him so they could get their bags out of the boot and go into the house. She understood that her parents, and especially her mother, needed time to deal with this. She, Ginny, and Harry could keep themselves occupied for hours if required.

They had all gone to bed about fifteen minutes ago and the house was quiet, so Ginny got up and tip-toed to Hermione's room and shut the door quietly before going over and lying on Hermione's bed. The two looked at each other in the low light from the window and giggled.

«Do you suppose Harry knows we do this?» Ginny asked with a grin.

«I think so, especially after the time last year when he caught us talking in the common room, but I think he likes to pretend it doesn't happen.» This was one aspect of the bond that Hermione really liked: having a sister. Ginny was nicer than she ever expected, too. «So, what did you want to talk about?»

Ginny's fun expression turned serious very quickly. She also fingered the bed covering to study the texture carefully for a moment as the

two girls laid on their side facing each other. «I ... my feelings have been changing lately. I don't understand if it's just me, our bond, the fact that I'm getting older, the Tournament, or what, and ... well, I'm a little scared.»

Hermione reached out and grasped Ginny's hand between them. «Tell me.»

Ginny smiled gratefully and felt a little better just talking about this with her scarily smart friend. «A couple of months ago, about the time the Tournament started, I started to feel a little differently about Harry. I...» she paused as she felt her face grow warm and stared at her hand. «I, I've been wanting him so bad when I'm with him. A few times, it's been hard to stop myself from touching him in some way and running my hands through his hair. When I'm with him, I want to kiss him, and I want to be with him - a lot. I don't have that tingly feeling like when we first bonded, but the feeling of closeness I have when I'm near him now is sort of like then. Do, do you feel like that with him?» She finally looked up and was happy that Hermione had a pleasant look and was not angry or jealous.

«I don't think anything is wrong,» Hermione told her as she gave the younger girl's hand a squeeze. «I think the timing with the Tournament is a coincidence because I haven't felt that way.»

«Good,» Ginny said gratefully. «That's one possibility down. Do you have any idea why I've been feeling this way?»

«I think it's you getting older. Maybe you're even subconsciously starting to look for a mate...»

«But I already have one.»

Hermione giggled. «I know, but that doesn't stop your feelings from thinking 'I'm growing up and I need a mate'. You are thirteen and heading onto fourteen. It wasn't uncommon for girls to be married at

fourteen as little as hundred years ago. In fact, it's been that way for most of recorded history.»

Ginny considered that and had to admit that Hermione was right about the historical perspective. The laws governing marriage in the Wizarding World had hardly changed over the last couple of hundred years. She still had doubts. «What about you? Did you have thoughts like this last year?»

Now it was Hermione's turn to blush. «Some. I told myself it wasn't important, but I will admit to starting to notice Harry more and wanting to be near him about the time I turned fourteen. Harry had just turned thirteen, so he was starting to change and starting to look more grown up.» She smiled to herself. «While I do come to help protect you two while you exercise, at times, I do find myself ignoring my reading and just watching Harry exercise.»

A giggle escaped Ginny. She gave her friend's hand a squeeze. «Then it's nothing strange?»

«I don't think so, Ginny. You're just growing up.» Hermione's look turned more conspiratorial. «If it makes you feel better, I've noticed Harry checking you out sometimes when you exercise.»

Ginny smiled and blushed deeply. «I've seen him stare at you when you're reading sometimes, sort of like he's daydreaming about you. He gets the cutest smile when he does.»

Hermione blushed again. «We're all growing up.» She looked at her clock and saw that it was getting late. «You'd probably better go back.»

«OK. Thanks Hermione!» Ginny gave her sister-mate another hug before she crept out and back to her own room.

The next morning, Ginny heard the music coming from the room

under her. With a smile, she jumped out of bed and quickly got dressed in her exercise clothes. Grabbing her miniaturized exercise step and her wand, she momentarily stopped by Harry's room before she hurried down and joined Emma as the woman was finishing stretching.

"Hi Ginny, I'm glad you're still doing this."

"I love doing it," Ginny told her enthusiastically. "Beside this, Harry has me doing callisthenic type exercises too."

"Good for him. By the way, where is he?" Emma asked good-naturedly.

"He should be here in a minute. I woke him up on my way down." Ginny blushed a little but kept on stretching.

"Hmm, will you stand for a minute please?"

Ginny complied. Harry came in at that time in shorts and a short-sleeved T-shirt, unlike Ginny's spandex outfit. He also had his shrunken step.

"Morning, Harry."

"Morning, Mum," Harry said, then happily gave her a quick hug.

Emma looked back at Ginny. "You've definitely filled out. I assume you've gained some muscle weight?"

Ginny blushed, and then harder when she noticed Harry was looking at her very appreciatively. "Yes. I weighed myself last night, and compared to the end of August, I've gained almost fifteen pounds. I also know I've grown almost a full inch too," she said proudly.

"I can tell." Emma squeezed Ginny's arm and looked down at her

legs. "Yes, you're not so stick thin any more. It looks good on you." She looked at Harry. "You've bulked up a little as well."

"I think I've added a little more than ten pounds. I don't think my height has changed much," he told her.

"You're both growing up," the mother told them with a smile. "Stretch, Harry, and then we can get started."

The two teens enlarged their steps back to the proper size and then spent the next hour exercising with Emma. At the end, Harry and Ginny took a breather and then started doing push-ups and then crunches.

Emma watched them and marvelled at how many they did. "No wonder you two are putting on muscle."

Harry chuckled. "Dan took me to get a fitness book the day before we returned to school, and we've been following that. I usually conjure a pull-up bar and stand, and we have my small weight set, but I won't bother with that for the few days we're here."

When they finished, Harry said, "I'm going to grab a shower first." He quickly ran off, leaving Ginny chuckling. She stretched a little more, since she had the time.

Emma decided this was a good time to talk to the girl. "Ginny, can I ask you a few things."

Ginny was not too nervous. She felt she could avoid most of the troublesome questions with vague answers. "Uh, sure."

With a smile, Emma said, "Hermione said you got to be Harry's official date at the Yule Ball the other night. How did that go?"

The girl grinned as if she has won a special prize. "It was wonderful.

Of course, I might have been his official date, but Hermione got to dance with him about half the time. We all had a great time."

Emma was pleased with that answer, because it led her to the question she had been seeking an answer to for some time, but had yet to get a good answer. "I'm glad you all had a good time. So tell me, how does that work with the three of you? Doesn't it cause fights between you and Hermione when you make Harry choose between the two of you?"

Ginny knew what Emma was trying to ask, and it was time for one of those vague answers. "It's not really a problem for us. We're all best friends and we have a good time together."

"But, what about choosing?" Emma asked in confusion.

"We don't. We enjoy the time together as it comes. Harry asked me to be his date because if he hadn't, then I couldn't have gone because I'm one year too young," Ginny explained as if it should have been obvious.

"But..."

"Emma, we really don't care since we're friends. We know decisions will probably have to be made some day, but we also know we have time before that becomes an issue. So for now, we just enjoy our time together as it happens." Ginny watched Emma trying to work through that and smiled to herself. They were going to have to tell the Grangers something soon, she thought.

The woman tried a different tack. "All right, that's now, but what about later, say in five years?" Emma's eyes suddenly went wide. "Please tell me they don't allow for multiple wives. I thought Sirius said they don't do that anymore."

Ginny chuckled and thought: If you only knew. "Generally, no, it's not

common anymore - or at least it's not in Britain amongst wizards and witches."

Emma exhaled and smiled in relief.

"On the other hand, my brother lives in Egypt and he's told me that in that country, you can still find sheiks who live in tents and have multiple wives. That's probably true for some other countries, too. Hermione told me that some of the Muggles still do that all over the world, though, depending on their religion or something."

"You mean like a harem?" Emma's voice went up in great surprise.

"I suppose. We used to allow multiple wives here until about a couple of hundred years or so ago," Ginny told her, enjoying the many looks of confusion and then surprise on the woman.

"But, that's just - so outdated..."

Ginny chuckled. "You have to remember that we're at least several hundred years behind you. Think what it was like five hundred years ago here, when kings, dukes, and knights were normal. Men had multiple wives then. Now, some still do, even if they try to hide it and call them mistresses," she said a little sadly and shook her head in disparagement.

"What do you mean?" Emma asked, wondering how that worked.

"Well, if they were truly multiple wives, like in the old days, it wouldn't be as bad as they would all have the proper status. But now, in some of the older and stupider families," Ginny said derisively, "the man will marry a woman for political or business gains, like to merge two families for more power. He'll use her to have an heir, then he'll take a 'mistress'," she said with air-quotes, "and spend most of his time with her because she's the one he loves. She may get time with him and he may buy her things, but that's all she ever gets from him. No

name, no inheritance, and if she gets pregnant, she is looked down upon as something just above dirt. The Wizarding World is far from perfect."

Emma just blinked, not quite able to take that concept in at first hearing. "That's so bizarre as to be unthinkable. In our society, she wouldn't be treated so poorly, though people might think she made a bad choice in the first place to be a mistress, but they wouldn't treat that badly."

Ginny shrugged. "I don't like parts of it, but it's normal to me. I grew up knowing that." She stood, thinking Harry should be done with his shower by now.

"I don't think Hermione would do that." Emma looked at her carefully. "Would you ever do that?"

Ginny realized this was an opportunity not to be missed. She could prepare the way, so to speak. "Be a mistress? Nope. Be a second wife, a real wife? Generally not. But to someone like Harry who is a wonderful person and is so honest he'd never cheat on his wife, let alone think of abusing one? I'd give serious thought to being a second wife to someone like him..." She paused and flashed Emma an impish grin. "But what are the odds I'd ever have that chance?" she asked before walking out of the door.

Emma continued to sit on the floor thinking that through. The whole conversation was like adding two and two and getting five and a third. It did not compute. To make it worse, she thought Ginny was teasing her at the end, but what if she was serious?

With a shudder, Emma slowly got up and went upstairs to get ready for the day. As she passed the kitchen, she saw Harry starting to work on breakfast. He was happily humming to himself as he worked. Harry was a very sweet boy and was rapidly turning into a fine young man. The thought of him having two real wives, as Ginny put it,

caused her brain to twist. She shook her head and started for her room again. What had they got themselves into when they gave birth to a witch?

Emma drove the teens into London and to the Leaky Cauldron. She had a set of "outer robes", which she donned when they reached the door to the pub. She also had Hermione's Modern Magical History, which said it covered the last four hundred years. She watched the three children take the Floo to the Ministry, while she gave Tom the bartender a Sickle and got a Butterbeer, and asked him to bring her another one shortly. Grabbing a booth that had a good view of the fireplace, she started reading, trying to find corroboration of what Ginny had told her.

The trio found Emma's actions that morning intriguing. She had insisted on driving them down and waiting for them. She had also requested one of Hermione's history books. Only Ginny had a clue as to why Emma was doing that, and she kept that information solidly to herself, amused at what she thought Emma was thinking.

They came out of a fireplace at the Ministry. This time, Amelia Bones was waiting for them. She escorted them down to Croaker's office. The man cast multiple privacy spells on the room.

"There, that should hold us. Welcome to my office again, and thank you for coming," the head Unspeakable greeted them.

"We appreciate you sharing information with us, unlike some," Harry said, unable to stop his dig at Dumbledore.

Croaker chuckled, but Bones passively sat there. "I assume you have not gotten the prophecy out of your Headmaster?"

"No sir, and to be honest, I've stopped trying. He seems to have his own view of the world that does not include sharing information with me. You've helped me understand what the main part of the

prophecy most likely says, and that's good enough for me," Harry explained.

"That's certainly your choice," Croaker said with a slight nod of acknowledgement. "Well, I'm happy to report good progress. A little over a month ago, we concluded negotiations with the Goblins. With a few concessions on our part, that we at the Ministry really should have done years ago anyway, and by way of some trickery, Bellatrix Lestrange signed a letter of consent, which was the most important part ... we were able to enter her vault where we found a cursed cup. We removed the curse right there and left, with the cup still sitting on the shelf."

"Yes," Harry practically hissed in jubilation, "another one down." The girls squealed and gave him a quick hug.

Bones smiled and Croaker laughed. "Well, if you're happy about that, I should also say that we found another yesterday."

"You did?" Harry asked amazed.

"We had guessed that Voldemort left one at Hogwarts, and I considered that those most knowledgeable about the castle were not the Headmaster, but the house elves..."

"Of course," Hermione said, sounding as if she was berating herself for missing the obvious.

"So," Croaker continued with a big smile, "we asked them and they retrieved Ravenclaw's diadem from some hidden storage closet and brought it to us. We removed the curse on it last night."

"Brilliant! So that's..." Harry counted mentally, "four. So, two more?"

"So Dumbledore thinks, at any rate. The problem is, we aren't really sure," Croaker said, not completely happy with having to say that.

"However, there is yet one more piece of good news."

"Yes," Harry said, moving forward in his seat slightly. The girls looked just as eager.

"We found the hiding place of another, but it was empty."

"Wait," Hermione said with a puzzled look. "If it was empty, how do you know that a Horcrux used to be there?"

Bones chuckled at Croaker's chagrined look.

"You really must interview with us when you finish school, Miss Granger," Croaker said with a smile slowing coming over him. "We found a replacement and a note with the person saying they had the Horcrux and planned to destroy it. The obvious problem is we don't know if the person was successful."

"So it's lost?" Hermione asked him.

"At least at the moment, but we do have a clue. The note had some initials in it. Logic states that the person was most likely a Death Eater who turned betrayer. I've handed that problem to Amelia." Croaker looked at the woman.

"I, of course, have access to the lists of known and suspected Death Eaters from the last war. There is only one person who had matching initials," Bones explained.

The trio looked at each other and grinned, anticipating success.

"Unfortunately, that person is known to be dead. He had one relative, who fortunately for us, is on our side and is not a Voldemort sympathizer." She smiled at him in anticipation of his reaction. "That living person is your godfather, Sirius Black."

Ginny squealed and hugged Harry. "He'll help us for sure. What are you looking for?"

"A heavy gold locket with a snake on the front." Croaker pulled out a drawing and showed the trio.

Harry's eyes went wide. "I've seen that. It's in Sirius's living room in a glass case."

Croaker looked very pleased. "That would be most serendipitous. Amelia?"

"Absolutely. Harry?" She looked at the boy with a charming smile. "How would you like to come with me to visit your godfather for a few minutes?"

He stood. "I'd like that, but you know it's going to be difficult to not tell him why you want it."

"Just leave that to me," she told him as she guided him out of the room and back to the atrium.

While they were gone, Hermione looked at the Unspeakable. "Mr Croaker? Do you have any idea what the last one is or where it might be?"

He blew out a deep breath. "I'm afraid I have to say no to both questions." He spoke with the girls for the next twenty minutes about various possibilities, based on what had been found so far.

Harry burst into the room very happy and plopped backed into his chair. "We got it!"

Amelia smugly walked in and placed a heavy gold locket on Croaker's desk. "I trust I can watch its destruction this afternoon?"

"Hmm, it may have to be tomorrow morning. Our curse breaker is out on assignment at the moment. Nevertheless, we're one closer." Croaker looked very pleased.

"So one more?" Harry asked, practically jumping.

"One more," he agreed. "However, as I was telling your good friends, we don't know what or where, but we will keep looking. In the meantime, keep training, Harry. Amelia and I will do our best to protect you and be there when he shows up again, but you will have some part in his destruction. That's all but guaranteed."

Harry nodded firmly. "I understand. We're training and I think it's going well. I thought being in the Triwizard Tournament was going to be bad for me. I suppose it has been, at least a little, but in some ways, having to train for it has helped me."

"I'm glad some good has come out of that," Bones told him.

"There is one potential problem," Hermione said hesitantly. When the adults looked at her, she told them, "At this time, we're planning on changing schools next year. So if we don't finish this by the end of the summer, we'll need to make plans on how to let us know if we need to return for Harry to finish off Voldemort."

Croaker and Bones shared concerned looks.

"I'm willing to finish him off," Harry said, "but we and our parents are tired of Dumbledore and his games."

"Will you return after you take your NEWTs?" Bones quietly asked.

"I don't know, but probably." Harry looked at his girls, but they did not offer any advice. "We haven't discussed it yet, but it will probably depend on whether Dumbledore and everyone else who wants to tell us what to do leaves us alone."

Croaker looked thoughtful at the answer. "Why don't we wait and see what's happened by this summer? Perhaps it will all work itself out by then. If not, I'm sure we can come up with something. Between the Director and myself, we have many resources available to us. I'm sure we can figure something out." He raised a brow at Bones.

"I'm sure we can work something out," she agreed pleasantly. "If there's nothing else to discuss, I'll escort all of you back."

The trio told Croaker good-bye. As Bones started to lead them back to the atrium, Ginny quickly spoke up.

"Madam Bones? Could you take us by my father's office? Please?"

Bones looked at her for a moment before she smiled. "I don't see why not, assuming he's in." She led them to the fourth floor and through a short maze of corridors to an office, where she knocked on the door.

The door was opened by a man with graying hair. "Director Bones?"

"Hello, Perkins, is Arthur in?"

"Yes, he is. Arthur?"

"Right here." Arthur Weasley appeared and opened the door further. "What can I ... Ginny!"

"I'll let you escort them out," Bones said as she withdrew with a smile.

"Why don't you... No, that won't work." Arthur sounded a little frustrated. "Say, Perkins, can you take an early lunch?"

"Sure, Weasley. Will an hour work?"

"That would be wonderful."

Perkins grabbed his hat and left with a brief nod and smile at the children.

"Come in, come in," Arthur directed them enthusiastically into the small office. "It'll be a little cramped, but this is probably the best place for now." He conjured one chair, then stopped, not sure if there was enough space for a third.

"That's all right, Mr Weasley," Hermione said as she nudged Harry in direction of Perkins' chair. After he sat, she motioned Ginny to sit in his lap while she took the conjured chair.

Arthur raised an eyebrow at the seating arrangements.

"We're all only friends, Dad," Ginny said. "Hermione usually does this when we're a seat short because I'm the lightest."

"Right," her father said with a knowing smile. "I'm glad to see you, Ginny. How have you been doing since the last letter you sent me?"

"We've all been very busy, but we're all also happy. Harry took me to the Yule Ball at school. We had a lovely evening."

Arthur gave her a knowing look, noting again that his daughter was sitting in Harry's lap. "While I'm always happy to see you and your friends, what are you doing down at the Ministry?"

"I needed to talk to Madam Bones about some things that happened to me in the past," Harry said quickly. "I guess this is one of those cases where fame can open doors," he said a little shyly.

Arthur smiled knowingly. "I understand."

"How have you been doing, Dad?"

"Besides missing you?" he asked with a caring look. "Your mother and I have been rather well. I believe she's mostly over Percy's leaving, although she has looked rather down since none of you children came home for Christmas."

"But how about you?" Ginny asked.

He gave her a very pleased look. "I do miss you, Ginny, and the house is very quiet, but I'm doing well. I now have a secret lunch with Percy once a week," he told her with a smile just for her. "I also want to thank you for the book you sent me about how things work, explaining Muggle items. I've found it very fascinating."

"You're welcome," his daughter told him. "Hermione helped me find it when I came up with the idea."

"Then my thanks to you as well," he said, inclining his head towards Hermione.

"I hate to end this, but we should probably go before my mother gets too worried," Hermione told them.

"Of course, we wouldn't want that. Let me lead you back to the atrium. How did you get here?" He Vanished the chair after Hermione stood and then opened the door to take them out.

"Mrs Granger drove us to the Leaky Cauldron and we took the Floo from there," Ginny answered.

Arthur nodded. "That sounds very easy. Will you be home during Easter break?"

"I don't know yet. The Tournament has changed so many schedules," Ginny answered. "We almost didn't get to go to Hermione's house

this week."

"I see." Arthur led them to the atrium in silence for a few minutes. "The Floo Powder is in the little pots next to the fireplace." His mask cracked and he suddenly looked sad as he pulled Ginny into a tight hug. "Take care of yourself, Ginny. Call me if anything goes wrong and I'll be there for you."

She hugged him back tightly. "Thank you, Daddy. I love you too."

When he let go of his daughter, he gave a kind smile and a pat on the shoulder to both Harry and Hermione before he quickly turned and strode back to his office.

"I think he's lonely," Hermione said softly.

"I think you're right," Ginny said a little sadly.

Harry grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze before he pulled her to the bank of fireplaces.

They each tossed some Floo Powder in, one after the other, and returned to the Leaky Cauldron. Back at the pub, Emma looked very relieved to see them.

In the car, Harry told her, "Mum, we have good news. You can tell Dad that good progress has been made on taking care of the evil wizard Voldemort. They are getting close to being done. Still, no one knows exactly when we'll be done."

"But it's good that you're getting closer, right?" she asked, hoping for a good answer.

"Yes, Mum," Hermione answered. "We're getting very close with only two tasks left and we're all excited about that. We also mentioned changing schools next year and they seemed agreeable to working

with us when we do."

"Your father will be happy to hear that too." Emma continued to drive them to their next stop, not sure why they wanted to go to a sporting goods store. She was happy for their news, and yet she mentally cursed the destiny that had been given to the wonderful boy she thought of as her son.

That evening, Sirius stopped by for dinner with a medium-sized brightly wrapped box. "Hi, Harry!" he called to his godson as he wrapped the young man in a hug. "Have you had a Happy Christmas?"

"Yeah, it's been pretty good," he replied, ignoring what had happened with Ron.

"Well, here's your present. It's what you asked for, plus a little something special from Moony and me."

Harry took the box from him as he gave his godfather a questioning look. "How do I know it's safe now?"

Sirius threw both hands over his heart and gave a fake shocked look. "Oh, Harry! You wound me. Not trusting a Marauder?"

Ginny snorted; Hermione rolled her eyes; the Grangers chuckled.

"No," Harry said very succinctly.

Sirius laughed. "Normally you'd be right to be dubious, but not today." When Harry continued to look at the box with suspicion, Sirius sighed. "Honestly, Harry, you can open that without worry. Moony and I did add to it, but in a good way."

Knowing he did not really have any reason to delay any longer without hurting the man's feelings, Harry unwrapped the gift. When

he opened the box, he saw that it contained three wooden boxes each about the size of a short loaf of bread. He looked up at his godfather.

"They're all the same, Harry."

Harry nodded and pulled them out, setting one in front of Hermione, one in front of Ginny, and finally one in front of himself.

"Is this the present you said would be coming later?" Hermione asked him.

"I thought we needed these," Harry said with a nod as he pulled his wand out and tapped the top of the little box. When he did so, it expanded and became the size of a normal trunk. He also noticed that one end had retractable wheels for easy rolling.

"Really?" Ginny said excitedly and pulled her wand out and expanded her new trunk too. Hermione followed suit.

"To key them to yourselves, put your hand on the latch and cast a mild Stinging hex on some other part of the latch." When Harry looked at him with a questioning look, Sirius said, "Yes, I mean it. We thought it was non-obvious. Once you do that, it's yours and it would take some very serious work to remove you from it."

The three keyed their trunk to themselves.

"Moony and I added several protections beyond the standard ones. If someone tries to break into your trunk, you'll know it. Now, open them up."

The teens looked in their trunks.

"You'll find a little lever in there. The position it's in determines which of the three compartments you access. Just move the lever, close,

and reopen to lid to get to another compartment. It'll be like having three trunks in one," Sirius said, grinning as he watched the girls' faces light up.

Ginny was the first to try it. "Amazing..." She looked up at Harry who was watching her with a smile too. She launched herself at Harry, tackling him to the floor and hugging him. He started laughing as they rolled over. Hermione joined in by throwing herself onto the pile. The adults laughed as they watched the teens act like, well, like little kids.

When they broke apart, Hermione kissed Harry on briefly on the cheek. "Thank you, Harry. Now I can take all my books with me."

"And I can take all my clothes with me," Ginny quickly added before she kissed him quickly on the cheek.

"What are you going to put into your trunk, Harry?" Emma asked.

"A little of this and that, but I thought the girls needed it more, especially when we change schools," he explained. "I told Sirius what I wanted and he found them for me." He looked at his godfather. "Thank you."

"Any time, Harry, any time..."

(A/N: Surely, in the 3½ years they've been at the school, they've heard a Merperson at least once. Yes, I gave them a little help and had it happen "recently", but I do think the sound of a Merperson shouting about something should be recognizable because it's so different.)

Chapter 20 - Water Can be Hazardous

The trio returned to the Leaky Cauldron at half one in the afternoon on the first of January, each with a miniature chest slung over their shoulder like a backpack. There were a number of other students there too, all saying good-bye to their parents. All three teens, even Ginny, hugged Dan and Emma good-bye. Professor Flitwick directed them to the fireplace. After Flooing, they found themselves in Professor McGonagall's office again.

On their way back to Gryffindor tower, they spotted the Weasley twins leaning against a wall and were surprised to see one waving them over. "Follow us," he said without elaboration when they were close enough to hear.

Harry shrugged at the quizzical looks from the girls and followed the twins. A moment later, they were in an unused classroom. "What's up?" he asked.

The two male Weasleys looked at each other. "You said you'd do it," said Twin One, who was standing to their right.

"No, you said you'd do it."

"No I didn't." Twin One glared at his brother. "I'll match you for it then."

Each brother held up his left palm and then beat his right fist into it. On the third beat, each right fist held out the index finger. "Wand. Again," they said together as they started the three count. The second time, both kept a fist. "Rock. Again." On their third try, the right twin went back to "wand" while the twin on the left slapped a flat right hand down on his left palm.

"Ha!" the twin on the right cried. "My wand cuts your parchment. You have to tell them."

The left twin sighed, "Fine." He looked at the trio, but mostly at Ginny, who was amused by their antics. "You need to know that we wrote to Dad on the day after Boxing Day about what happened after the Yule Ball. He was..." Twin Two looked at Twin One.

"Less than pleased?" Twin One offered.

"I would have suggested 'pissed off', but take your pick," Twin Two said to his sister with a shrug. "Anyway, it was bad enough that he came up here the next day and had a talk with us and Ron. We've never seen Dad so angry, not even at us..."

"And that's saying something," Twin One interjected.

Ginny giggled, while her bond-mates looked at her sceptically because of her reaction.

"But we witnessed the conversation. The short version is that Dad told Ron to never do anything like that ever again. But if he did, Ron would never finish school here at Hogwarts, he'd be dragged home, even if it was the day before NEWT exams."

"Oh my, that's ... extreme," Hermione said wide-eyed and with alarm.

Harry silently agreed with her and with Hermione's next question.

"Did he get Ron to say why he ... said what he did?"

Twin One chose to answer. "It was essentially jealousy. Apparently he had started to develop feelings for you, Hermione, and he had wanted to take you to the Ball, but felt that Harry 'got everything'," he said while making air quotes. "Dad told him that who Hermione liked and who she spent time with was her choice. The last thing he said was that a real Weasley would make things right, but he also didn't give Ron any deadline for that."

"We thought you should know," the other twin said.

"Thanks, Fred," Ginny said, hugging the one on the right. "Thanks, George," she said while hugging the other.

"Yeah, thanks, guys," Harry told them. "We'll watch and see what he does, but I don't think things will be like they were before. This is the second time he's insulted Hermione in a major way and I don't really want to give him an opportunity for a third."

Hermione nodded her agreement.

"We understand," the twins said as they left.

The trio looked at each other.

«It does help to understand why, but I'm still unhappy with him,» Hermione said.

«I'll ignore him until he apologizes,» Harry said, sad that his friendship with Ginny's brother had deteriorated again. «I'm not sure what I'll do after that.»

«Me too,» Ginny agreed, «even if he is my brother. His attack was uncalled for, no matter what his reason.»

«Thanks,» Hermione said happily and drew the other two to her, for a three-way hug.

That evening at Dinner, the trio noticed Ron giving them furtive looks, but he said nothing. All three of them ignored the boy, including Harry when he went to bed that evening.

The night before the second task of the Triwizard Tournament, the trio were sitting at a table doing their homework. As usual, they sat

alone. Harry looked around; it looked like a very typical evening in the common room. Most people were studying. A few were playing games. Ron, who had taken a full week to apologize and was now relegated to the status of merely a friend like Seamus, was playing chess with a seventh year. Harry now spent more time with Neville than any other male friend, and he enjoyed the friendship of his once shy dorm-mate.

He wondered when someone would come to try to take Ginny or Hermione away. The obvious time was this evening just before curfew or tomorrow morning at breakfast time. However, it might be hard to find someone tomorrow morning, so he expected to see someone from the Tournament this evening, probably Dumbledore. Therefore both girls were staying very close to him this evening.

At ten, right on time for curfew, the portrait opened. Professor McGonagall walked in and looked around. Everyone instantly looked her way, as she rarely made an appearance in the common room. A few first years were sitting on the floor near the fire and she looked at them with mild disapproval. "First and second years should be in bed by now," she said sternly as she eyed them. The small group hastily got up and ran up the stairs, as did a few others.

"The rest of you should be going to bed within the next few minutes. It is very important to get enough sleep, so you can do well in your classes." She surveyed the remaining group, getting a few nods.

"But Professor, we don't have class in the morning," one of the Weasley twins piped up.

"You should not get into bad habits," she countered with one of her famous stern looks. The twins wisely did not continue the argument.

Nearly half of the students started picking up their things to go up to their dorm room, where they could continue their reading in private.

McGonagall looked over to the table on the side. "Miss Weasley, if you would kindly come with me?"

Ginny looked at Harry, who nodded ever so slightly, and turned back to face McGonagall. "Professor, is this about the second task?"

The professor was visibly startled, although she was obviously trying to hide it. "I wasn't specifically informed of that, but I do need you to come with me to my office for a discussion."

Digging into her robes, Ginny pulled out a letter and held it out. "I'm sorry, Professor, but I'm not allowed to be in the Tournament except as a spectator. Here's a letter from my father if you need it."

McGonagall stood there for a moment before slowly walking over to their table and taking the letter.

Harry tried to keep a neutral expression as he watched the drama unfold. He knew he probably should not be so amused at watching this, but he found it fun to counter their plans.

When she finished the note, Professor McGonagall looked at the youngest Weasley for a moment. "I was not told this meeting was for the Tournament, but it's not hard for me to figure out that it is so. You will not be hurt. Will you not come anyway?"

Ginny took a deep breath and steeled herself. With great courage, she said, "No, Professor. I'm sorry, it's not that I don't believe you, but I believe you were given false information."

McGonagall looked surprised again. "How so?"

Surprisingly to the trio, McGonagall did not sound upset.

"Because unplanned events have happened, namely Harry's entry into the Tournament and Harry's dragon getting loose," Ginny said,

using Hermione's argument. "Those events should have never happened, and yet they did. Also, the first task was very dangerous and I do not want be a part of this in any way, just like Harry did not want to be in the Tournament. Lastly, if I were included in this task, it would distract Harry, and I do not wish to do that either."

"I see," McGonagall drawled, considering what she was told. "Very well. We can not make you do this." She turned to Hermione. "Miss Granger..."

"I'm sorry, Professor, but I will not participate either, and for the very same reasons. I also have a note from my parents, if you'd like to see it," Hermione said evenly as she reached into her robes and pulled out a letter.

McGonagall took it and read it, paling slightly as she finished.

It was hard, but Harry kept his smirk to himself. He was sure the professor's reaction was prompted by his parents' statement that, if Hermione was a part of the Tournament in any way other than as a spectator, they would take this to the newspapers and make sure that everyone knew Hogwarts did not respect parental requests for their child's safety.

"If you don't mind, I'll hold on to these letters for the moment," McGonagall said as she refolded them.

"Of course not, Professor," Hermione said graciously. "Those are copies and we have the originals if you need more."

McGonagall looked over their heads for a few seconds before nodding her head. "Very well. I need to return to the meeting in my office; however, I would request that you, Miss Weasley, and you, Miss Granger, remain here for the next twenty minutes. You may head on to bed, Mr Potter."

The girls agreed to the request, but Harry said, "Thank you, Professor, but I think I'll wait here until this is concluded."

Professor McGonagall nodded as if she understood his real reasons and left.

"What was that about?" Ron asked his sister from where he sat at a nearby table.

"I was being asked to be a part of the second task, but I didn't want to," she answered and watched him expectantly.

"But, why? That would be brilliant!" Ron looked like he had won the Tournament right there, such a dreamy look came over him.

The trio looked at each other, and all three had to put a hand over their mouth to stop from sniggering out loud.

Ginny swallowed her mirth and replied, "Well, if you think it would be brilliant, feel free to volunteer when they return."

"Why would they come back?" Ron looked puzzled.

"Because they need to pick someone, and McGonagall said for them to wait," Harry explained. "Also there was no reason to tell them to stay here if no one is coming back."

"Oh, right," Ron said sheepishly at having his oversight pointed out to him. "I'll be back in a minute. Don't let them leave before I return." He took his chess set and raced upstairs.

They looked at each other and Hermione said, "I'm sorry, Ginny, but at times, he's such a, a..."

"Daft prat?" Ginny offered with a mischievous grin. Harry chuckled, as did Hermione.

"Actually I was thinking 'clueless idiot'," he answered.

"I suppose either would do," Hermione said, with a matching grin.

They returned to their studies. Ron returned a moment later with a Quidditch book and sat down to read, but he could not sit still as he anticipated his opportunity.

About fifteen minutes after she left, Professor McGonagall returned, this time with Professor Dumbledore.

The Headmaster did not smile when he saw Harry. "Miss Weasley, I understand that you will not join us for a conversation. I would ask that you come, as a courtesy to me."

To her credit, Ginny looked calm and in control, which were not her inner feelings. She was actually quite nervous, but she approached this like a conversation with her mother. "I was about to head to bed when Professor McGonagall came in, but asked me to wait. I assume that was to go and get you, since she could not tell me what the meeting was about." When he did not answer, she asked, "What is the meeting about - sir?"

"I'm afraid that I am not at liberty to say at the moment," Dumbledore looked at her with a serious expression.

"I see." She looked at Harry, who smiled slightly, and she almost thought he pursed his lips at her as if blowing a kiss, but she knew she must be imagining that as this was not the time or place for that activity. Perhaps it was time to have another conversation with Hermione about her thoughts of Harry.

When she said nothing else, Dumbledore asked, "Will you come with me, Miss Weasley, as a favour to me?"

Ginny bravely held her position. "I'm sorry, Professor, but the Head of House Weasley says that I may not participate in the Tournament other than as a spectator. Professor McGonagall has the letter."

"Miss Weasley, I was delayed in coming here because I stopped to contact your father. He said that he wrote the letter at your request. Therefore, you may participate if you desire. I can also promise you that every precaution possible will be taken to ensure your safety during this task. Please come with me for the good reputation of the school," Dumbledore entreated.

"And I asked him because Harry asked me not to participate, which I agree with," Ginny argued. "I'm sorry, Professor, but this has nothing to do with my school work and would only make things more difficult for Harry by causing him to worry. Any other problems this may cause are not my responsibility."

Dumbledore did not look happy. After a moment, he turned to Hermione.

Before anything could be said, Hermione told him, "I'm sorry, Professor, but I will not participate either, and for the same reasons. You have the letter from my parents, who are still not happy that Harry is involved in this Tournament."

"I must have one of you for the Tournament," Dumbledore said with a hint of exasperation.

"I'll go!"

Dumbledore turned and was slightly surprised to see Ron Weasley standing there, looking very eager. "Mr Weasley? You would take your sister's place in the Tournament and help Mr Potter?"

"Of course, I think it would be brilliant," Ron answered excitedly.

The Headmaster thought about it for a few seconds before he turned back. "Miss Weasley, do you think there would be any objection to your brother participating?"

Ginny smiled. "No sir, it's not a problem. Dad has five other boys."

"Ginny!" her brother protested.

Laughs from the other direction caught her attention. Ginny looked around to see Fred and George laughing so hard they were having to hold each other up.

"Very well, then, Mr Weasley, if you would come with us." Dumbledore glanced at Harry and saw the fourth champion smiling as if he did not have a worry. Dumbledore wondered what was going on with those three, and promised himself to start paying closer attention to them. The prophecy from the end of last year returned to his mind, reinforcing his new plan.

Ron walked out of the common room after Dumbledore and McGonagall.

"What was that about, Harry?"

Harry turned and saw Neville, who deserved an answer as his close friend. He also noticed that the entire room was paying attention to his answer. "For the second task, the clue in the golden egg said that they had planned on taking my closest friend for me to rescue. I figured out the clue and we decided that Ginny would be picked since she went to the Yule Ball with me. We also determined that if she did not go, they would most likely ask Hermione in her place. Since none of us want to be in the Tournament, we took steps to prevent that."

Neville started grinning, as did most of the others. There was something fun about pranking the teachers. "I know you two aren't getting along well at the moment, but you will rescue him though,

right?"

Harry chuckled. "Well, the stupid rules require me to at least try, but this way, I know that my best friends and family are safe." Everyone laughed at the thought of Harry getting one up on the Headmaster. "I will try to rescue him because he's Ginny's brother." Almost all of those left chuckled as they picked up their things and headed up to their dorm rooms.

Harry hugged both girls and watched them go up the stairs, before he headed up to his dorm room.

The girls went to Ginny's room first, where she grabbed night clothes and clothes for tomorrow. Then they went to Hermione's room. After Lavender and Parvati were in for the night, Hermione locked the door, put up an alarm ward she had researched just for this, and she put a chair in front of the door. Feeling somewhat safe from someone coming during the night to take one of them away, Hermione and Ginny got ready for bed and crawled into Hermione's bed.

"I've never had a sleep-over before," Hermione said.

"Me neither," Ginny said with a giggle.

They each slept surprisingly well for having to share a bed.

Harry awoke a little early and quickly got dressed. That included wearing his swimming trunks underneath as well as strapping a knife he had bought onto his waist. His polished wand was already in a wand holster on his left forearm. That should be all he needed, at least as far as what he could personally take to the task.

He hurriedly went downstairs and sat in the chair that faced the girls' stairs, a place he sat on many mornings. He was anxious to see if their planning had been useful or not. He could "feel" that both were still upstairs, but he was going to be deeply pissed off if someone had

tried to take one of the girls during the night.

Not too much later, Ginny came bounding down the stairs; Hermione was not far behind her. Harry hugged each of them, very happy to see them. "Any attempts?" he asked nervously.

"I asked my dorm mates and they weren't aware of anyone trying to find me," Ginny told him.

"None that we're aware of," Hermione answered. "I suppose we might have been slightly paranoid."

He was relieved at the answers. "Better safe than sorry, and I'm hopeful they stick with Ron." He saw the "Chaser Girls" (as he called them) coming down the stairs, so he called them over. "Hey, I need you to do me a big favour this morning."

"What?" Angelina asked. Alicia and Kate looked curious as well.

"I don't think anything will happen since they already have Ron, but I'd like you three to keep an eye on Hermione and Ginny. I don't want anyone to try to take one of them and switch for Ron before today's task starts. Will you help me, please?" Harry begged them and did his best sad-puppy face.

Katie cracked first. "Of course, Harry. Anything for a fellow teammate." The other two girls agreed quickly thereafter.

"Thanks!" he told them enthusiastically. "That's a load off my mind. You could probably get Fred and George to help, too." Hermione and Ginny thanked each of the three girls for helping out before they all headed to the Great Hall.

At the breakfast table, Harry felt his stomach start to rebel, just like before a big Quidditch game. He compromised between his mind and nerves with some tea and sipped on that.

Ginny noticed and grabbed some toast, smearing it heavily with Harry's favourite jam. "Here, you have to eat something or you'll not be able to keep up."

"That's right, Harry, you must have some energy." Hermione scooped some scrambled eggs onto a plate and put it in front of him. "I'd tell you to eat some bacon for the protein, but eggs will be easier on your stomach."

Harry wanted to argue, but he could not fault their caring for him. So he took the toast and picked up his fork. Once he had started, he surprised himself by eating all the eggs and the toast Ginny had given him, plus one more piece of toast and jam.

"Thank you for not fighting us, Harry," Ginny told him with a smile and kissed his cheek near his ear. She took the opportunity to whisper: «There's a lot more of that waiting for when you finish the task.» He could not stop the blush.

From the other side, he felt a second kiss on the cheek and another whisper: «I can guess what Ginny told you and the same applies from me.» Harry's blush did not let up.

He tried to return to normal by looking around the room. Unfortunately, he saw Professor McGonagall get up and walk over to Cedric. She said something to him and then turned and started coming his way, with Cedric rising and following her.

"It's time, Mr Potter. If you'll follow me, please?" McGonagall said and then slowly started walking away.

Ginny threw her arms around Harry in a tight hug. "Please be careful, Harry."

When she let go, Hermione also gave him a hug. "Be careful, Harry."

Remember, it's better to be safe and fail the task than to try to finish and get yourself hurt or killed."

"I promise I'll be careful," he told them both. «Do you have my things?» he quietly asked. When Hermione nodded, he smiled at her and left. He and Cedric walked in silence to a large tent near the lake.

Inside the tent, Harry saw that both Viktor and Fleur were already there. Looking around, he saw four lounge chairs, along with a table and various drinks. It looked like Madam Pomfrey had already been here, as some of her medical supplies were on a table, in case they were needed later. Not knowing what to do while he waited, he walked over to the nearest lounge chair and reclined in it. Closing his eyes, he relaxed and thought about his bond-mates, letting an easy grin come over him as he thought about their promised rewards.

"Ow can you just lay there as if you 'aven't a care in the world?" an accented female voice yelled from nearby.

Harry opened his eyes and saw Fleur glaring balefully at him. "Because I deciphered the clue and took steps to ensure I was ready. Didn't you?" he asked calmly, refusing to let her rile him up.

"Of course I know what the egg said, but they 'ave my sister!" she snapped back.

"Ah," Harry said with as much sympathy as he could. "I'm sorry they surprised you."

"I noticed that your date to the Yule Ball was at breakfast. How did you manage that, Harry?" Cedric asked him. Krum looked very interested in the answer as well.

Harry noticed that Cedric was trying not to look at Fleur and found that interesting. "I figured out they were going to take a person as a

hostage to rescue and took steps to protect the two people that are my closest friends so they would not be used in the task." Harry shrugged, not sure what else to say.

"But the clue... they said 'something' and 'it'. 'Ow did you know it was a person and not a thing?" Fleur asked, still quite upset.

He started to feel a little mental pressure that was easily ignored, and assumed that was the Veela allure that Cedric was trying to avoid. "Because I own almost nothing of value they could take," Harry said simply. "I have my wand, but they can't take that from me as I need it for the task. I have one family heirloom, but very few people know about it. Almost everything else that I have of any value only has vague sentimental value or can easily be replaced. Therefore, it must be a person."

The two boys were nodding in acceptance of that logic. Fleur did not argue, but she still looked upset.

"Who did they take for you, Cedric?" Harry asked.

"I haven't been able to find Cho this morning, so I suspect they took her," the Hufflepuff said, as he took a seat on the end of one of the lounge chairs.

"What about for you, Krum?" Harry asked, wondering if the Quidditch star would even talk to him. He had not done more than grunt during the first task.

After a moment, Krum slowly said, "My date was also gone."

"Greengrass?" Harry asked and Krum nodded. Harry decided that English was not easy for Krum, hence why he talked so little; or at least Harry wanted to believe that to be charitable.

Krum grabbed a glass of water and then sat on the end of a lounge

chair like Cedric. Fleur continued to pace the room like a caged animal, while Cedric stared at the ground.

At a quarter to ten, the judges entered the tent and greeted the champions in a chipper mood. Even Harry, the most relaxed, did not return the happy greetings.

"Well, let's get started then," Bagman said, ignoring the unease of the champions. "Did anyone not work out the clue?" He looked around and none of the champions said anything. "Very well then. As you know, a person close to you is now in the village of the Merpeople. You will have one hour to rescue them and bring them back to the dock from where you leave. The only charm you're allowed to cast before I start you is a warming charm on yourself. If you choose to do that, you must say the spell out loud. Please follow me."

As they walked out, Harry quietly said to Cedric, "I wonder what idiot thought it would be fun to jump into freezing water in February?"

Cedric could not help but smile. "Thanks, Harry." He paused for a moment. "While I've heard stories about some of your adventures, I'm surprised you're not in Hufflepuff. You display a number of those tendencies."

Harry shrugged. "The Sorting Hat said I could do well in any house." They walked on to the dock that had not been there the day before. There was also a small tower with a big clock on it. It had many ticks on it and every fifth tick was numbered, showing from zero up to fifty-five. At the moment, the single hand pointed at zero.

Once on the dock, Harry found himself shivering in the cold wind blowing directly off the lake. He cast a warming charm on himself, making it audible as requested. He noticed how the dock was constructed and smiled to himself, happy that they had helped him without knowing it.

Bagman took a moment to tell the audience in the stands about what he had told the champions in the tent. There was a little more detail, but nothing useful for the champions. "Champions, get ready!" he shouted with a Sonorus to help his voice carry.

All the champions divested themselves of their robes and most of their clothes. Harry was in his swim trunks and a T-shirt, as was Cedric. Krum was in trunks only. He noticed that Fleur was in a silver one-piece swimsuit that was skin-tight and showed a nice figure - not that he really cared as he had two mates who would show him more than that in a few years.

"Begin!" Bagman shouted and shot a Cannon-blast charm into the air.

Off to the side, he noticed Krum dive straight in, blurring as he hit the water. Cedric and Fleur cast a Bubblehead Charm and dove in.

Harry started casting Summoning charms, tearing up the planks that made up the dock's walking surface. His plan called for a little construction time up front to save a lot more time later.

"While the other three have already entered the water, it looks like Potter is trying to build something to help out," Bagman announced as Harry worked.

A brief inspection revealed that the planks were six inches wide by two thick, and six feet long. Harry laid eight of them side by side to make a platform four feet wide by six feet. He then laid two more boards across them, one at each end, and attached them with a Sticking charm to each of the other boards they touched. Imagining very carefully, he conjured two long blocks of polystyrene for buoyancy and stuck those on as well. Finally, he then conjured ten feet of rope before turning and casting a Summoning charm towards Hagrid's hut.

While he mentally sustained the Summoning charm, he tied the rope to the front two corners of the platform, or raft, and put a small loop in the rope in the middle. That allowed him to guide it more easily.

Turning back towards Hagrid's place, he did not have to wait long before a bag showed up, which he was able to catch with ease. Opening the bag, he pulled out his broom and a pair of diving fins, the latter being Hermione's contribution to his original idea. The last thing required was to shrink the raft. Holding the small raft and fins in one hand, he mounted his Firebolt and flew towards the centre of the lake.

"Ingenious! He's made a raft to..." he heard Bagman say as he flew off at top speed, many times faster than anyone could swim.

Less than a minute later, he was slightly to the left of the centre of the lake. If Ginny's information had been correct, the village should be below him. If it was off, it should not be by too much.

Harry un-shrunk the raft and let it drop the last few feet so it floated on the water. Landing on it, he set his broom down as he could not use it underwater. Sitting on the edge of the raft, he attached the fins to his feet, cast a Bubblehead Charm on himself, and jumped into the lake. The fins helped him swim so much faster that he could use only them to propel himself, leaving his arms free. He lit his wand to see better and dove.

He could hold the Bubblehead charm for a little over fifteen minutes, but that should not be needed as he heard the Merpeople singing and they sounded reasonably close. He headed in that direction and a few minutes later he found four floating figures tied to the bottom, along with a half dozen Merpeople nearby, each with a spear or trident. Harry assumed they were guards to make sure the students were not injured.

As he swam towards Ron, he suddenly noticed that the smallest

figure was not just floating like the others. It was struggling as if trying to get loose. Harry shot a Cutting charm at the rope holding Ron and then transfigured Ron's clothes into expanded polystyrene to give him buoyancy. Ron started to float upwards slowly and Harry left him to it for the moment.

Swimming over to the struggling figure, Harry saw it was a little girl with long silvery-blond hair. She had to be the little sister Fleur had been so worried about. He also saw that while Ron and the other two had looked asleep - he presumed they must be in a Stasis spell of some sort - the little girl was awake and trying to untie the rope from her ankle. When she saw Harry, she reached out to him with bulging cheeks and a wild, panicked look on her face.

It did not take a genius to figure out that she had woken up early and was now in the process of drowning. He swam over hurriedly and placed a Bubblehead charm on her too. It fit snugly around her head. Touching his wand to the Bubblehead charm, he conjured some air, expanding the Bubblehead. She stopped trying to reach out to him and took a few large gulps of air with a look of great relief - the look of panic slowly easing. Looking at him, she pointed to the rope on her ankle.

Harry saw the Merpeople starting to swim his way and realized they would think he was trying to save two people. He had no way to tell them that he had to rescue her because his air charm probably would not last more than about five minutes. He had tried it in practice, in case something should go wrong, and his second charm had been short-lived and variable in duration. It also tended to shorten the life of his first Bubblehead too.

To slow the guardians down, Harry cast a Blasting curse in their direction and across their path, but carefully aimed not to hit them. The Merpeople immediately stopped, although they were screeching at him and shaking their weapons. Ignoring them, Harry cast a Cutting charm at the rope holding the girl. She tried to cling to him, so

he moved her around to his back, with her arms around his neck, before he started swimming up for all he was worth.

About halfway up, they came to Ron who was still floating up slowly. Harry let him continue to ascend on his own, as he knew he would be busy for a few minutes. A glance back down showed the Merpeople had not followed, and he was relieved.

As they broke the surface of the water, he cancelled the Bubblehead charms on himself and the girl. Amazingly, they were only about twenty feet from his raft, so he swam to it.

"Get on the raft," he told her, hoping she understood English. As if coming out of a fog, he suddenly remembered he knew enough French to talk to her, as long as she did not speak too fast. «Get on the boat.» He kicked his fins hard as he grabbed her waist and lifted. She grabbed the wood and rope and pulled herself up. As soon as she was seated, she began talking very fast in French.

"Vous avez sauvé ma vie!" she rattled off several times, excitedly.

She had spoken so quickly and his attention was not fully on her as he was searching for Ron, he was not sure exactly what she had said.

«Err, yes,» he said distractedly «Please stay there, I need to help my friend.» For a second, he thought he felt something vaguely familiar, but his concern to finish this task made him ignore everything else for the moment.

Harry summoned Ron, which made the redhead come the rest of the way up very quickly and then float on his back. With a grin at the strange sight, Harry transfigured Ron's clothes back to their normal state. Harry levitated his dorm-mate onto the raft just as he started to wake up.

"Uh, where am I?" Ron asked groggily.

"You're in the lake, Ron. Be careful you don't knock everyone overboard. Now, help me up." Harry swam around to the short end at the back, so the length and weight of the raft along with two passengers would counter-balance him better.

Ron shook his head to clear the rest of his grogginess and noticed the girl. "Who's she?"

"Fleur's sister; she was drowning. Come on, Ron, the clock is still going," Harry urged him.

"Uh, yeah, right." He slowly turned and grabbed Harry's hand. The girl handed Ron the rope to hold with the other hand and Harry climbed up.

With three people on the raft, Harry was glad he had used the blocks of polystyrene. "Good. Now hand me the broom." Ron found it and handed it over. Harry put it under him and floated up a few feet. Now he considered what he needed to do. When he had planned this, there was only him and one other person. Deciding she was small enough, he slowly flew over to the girl, hovering two feet above the raft. «Can you climb on behind me?» He scooted up and pointed behind him.

"What did you say, Harry?" Ron asked in a very puzzled voice.

The girl nodded excitedly. "Oui!" Carefully, she stood and threw her leg over the broom. Reaching around Harry, she grabbed his waist.

One of her hands touched his hand and he felt the tingle and blissful pleasure. It was something he had felt twice before in his life and knew exactly what it meant. "Shit! I am so dead!" he hissed quietly, not sure if that came out in English or Parseltongue.

On the shore, a brunette and a redhead felt a subtle movement of their magic within them for a moment, as if there was a slight pull and push on their magic. They had never felt anything like that before, but by looking through their Omnioculars from the Quidditch World Cup and seeing the three people on the raft, it was not hard to guess what had happened.

"I'm going to kill her," the redhead said softly, as she watched Harry help the little girl onto his broom. "

The brunette softly growled in frustration, but did not correct the girl next to her, as she had similar thoughts. "Along with whoever put her down there."

Harry's problem of how to get everyone back was still plaguing him. He could not use a hand to hold the girl. As much as he hated to do it, he quickly raised his shirt a few inches and put her hand on his bare stomach. She let go of his hand for the greater contact on his body, allowing him to use that hand to guide the broom. Reaching out with his other hand, down and back, he called out, "Ron, hand me the rope and then use both hands to hold on to the front of the raft. Balance yourself in the centre."

Ron followed instructions and Harry started to tow the raft back, flying a few feet over the water. It was a lot slower than when he flew out to the centre of the lake, but it was still faster than swimming. Originally, Harry had planned to put Ron on the back of his broom. In their practice room, Harry had tried that with Ginny and the broom had held them both up. Now, he had to hold on and not go too fast, lest he let go of the rope or tear his arm out of its socket. The raft was still lightened, but the drag on the water could not be helped. Unless...

Harry stopped flying and pointed his wand at the raft.

"What are you doing?" Ron yelled.

With a swish and a flick, the raft rose up in the air.

"Harry!" Ron's voice cracked and jumped up an octave.

Holding the levitation charm, Harry started flying again, making much better speed now. It was still slow by Firebolt speeds, but he was happier. He ignored the incomprehensible sounds coming from Ron, considering this payback for Ron's actions at the Yule Ball.

A couple minutes later, he heard Bagman yell, "And here's our first champion back in ... nineteen minutes! Harry Potter will stay in first place!" Everyone was screaming and yelling, but Harry ignored it all and landed the raft and Ron on the dock which had been restored in his brief absence. Flitwick must have replaced the missing boards, he thought. He then landed on the dock himself and went to dismount. To his embarrassment, the girl was holding onto him so tightly, he could not and she refused to move.

Looking up, he saw the five judges and a woman that looked like Fleur's older sister running towards them. The fit-looking woman with the silvery-blond hair won the race.

"Gabrielle!"

Now Harry knew the girl's name.

The woman's fierce hug enveloped both of them because Gabrielle would not let go of him. Without letting go, she started talking in rapid French, which Harry only caught partially. When she paused, the younger girl responded, talking just as fast.

"Harry," Dumbledore called out as he approached, huffing from his running. "Please explain why you have Miss Delacour's person." The other judges ringed them to hear.

"She was drowning so I had to save her," he simply said.

The woman said something quietly in French and the girl answered just as quietly. When the girl finished speaking, the woman's eyes narrowed and Harry would have sworn he saw heat waves coming off her hands, which were cupped at her side.

"I was promised she'd be safe! Who put the spell on my daughter?" she asked menacingly, directing her glare mostly towards the French Headmistress, who looked somewhat intimidated despite her size.

Her daughter? That woman who looked like Fleur's older sister is her mother? Harry worked through that while silence descended on the small crowd around them.

"It was not I," the large Headmistress said hastily. "Dumbledore was in charge of the spells." Everyone faced the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

"Mrs Delacour, I can assure you that nothing should have gone wrong..."

"Do you call waking up underwater and almost drowning nothing? You are an arrogant fool! You did not take account of her heritage, did you?" She glared at the old man who briefly glanced at the little girl. "No, I can see you did not ... vous bâtard Anglais!" Her native French took over in her anger.

Headmistress Maxime gasped while everyone else looked like they were wondering if the woman had really said what they thought she had said. Harry understood perfectly and it was all he could do not to goggle.

It was then that Harry noticed Hermione and Ginny approaching. He closed his eyes as he mumbled, "I'm so dead. I'm so dead."

Apparently Mrs Delacour heard him, because she looked at him and then turned and saw his two girls. A concerned look came over her and she bent down so she could whisper to Harry: "Do you understand what has happened between you and my daughter?"

Harry could only nod, fear stopping his tongue.

"And these two other girls are also bonded to you?"

He nodded again, very surprised she had figured it out so quickly.

"Then you must hold on and pretend until we can all talk. Pretend saving my daughter makes her look like a new little sister. After this, we will go somewhere private, the five of us." Mrs Delacour whispered quickly in French to her daughter and Harry felt Gabrielle nod her head against his back.

When he looked back up, all the adults were looking at him strangely. Further problems were delayed when Madam Pomfrey came bustling over. "You can talk later, I need to check them out and give them potions for the cold." She grabbed Ron first and pointed him towards the tent.

Harry persuaded Gabrielle to loosen her hold on him and dismounted the broom. Putting his hand on her bare neck, he guided her towards the tent. He also noticed that Mrs Delacour was now whispering to Hermione and Ginny. They did not look happy, but they were not throwing hexes, which Harry decided was a positive.

Madam Pomfrey dried them all off with a spell, wrapped blankets around them, and then gave them a Pepper-Up potion. The three who had been in lake were feeling quite warm now.

When the school nurse went back out of the tent, Hermione and Ginny came in. Harry grabbed Gabrielle's hand as he looked over at Ron, glad his friend was eating a snack and not paying attention.

«I'm sorry, it was an accident,» he said to his girls, speaking very quietly in French to make sure Ron did not overhear. «She was drowning and I had to save her.»

Ginny started to say something, and based on her look, it was not going to be good. Hermione put a hand on her arm and stopped her. «Harry,» she said just as quietly, «logically, we understand, but we're still upset.»

He glanced at Ron again, who was finishing eating. «We'll talk as soon as we can.»

"Do you speak English?" Hermione asked the girl, speaking quite slowly.

"Non. Je comprends l'anglais simple," she replied.

Hermione nodded. "Since she only understands simple English, let's see if our French is good enough." She addressed the little girl. «We have taken French lessons for almost two years, so we can talk this way as long as you do not talk too fast.»

The girl looked a little less afraid before she nodded.

"You can talk to her?"

They looked up at Ron, unaware that he had walked over.

"Yes, we've been learning French, Ron," Hermione said.

"Why?"

"Because it can be useful, like now," she explained, as if it should be obvious.

"And because it makes it easier to talk to new friends," Harry told him, sticking to Mrs Delacour's story.

"Oh, right." Ron accepted the story and acted like he did not care if he had any French friends or not. "Well, I'm going back out there." Ron pulled the blanket he was wearing around him tightly, wearing it like a badge of honour, and walked out of the tent.

Gabrielle pointed at the boy. «Who is he?»

«He is my brother,» Ginny said, not angrily, but still not her usual happy self. «No one knows about us, not even him.»

Gabrielle thought on that for a moment and then nodded.

«This is Gabrielle,» Harry said to his girls. Holding out his hand to each in turn, he said, «She is Hermione and she is Ginny.»

Before more could be said, they all heard crying coming from outside the tent. Looking up, they saw Fleur was the one sobbing as she entered. Her mother was there and pointed at Gabrielle, who was sitting next to Harry and holding his hand beneath the blankets around them.

"Gabrielle!" Fleur ran over and wrapped her sister in a hug. It was a little awkward because Gabrielle insisted on not letting go of Harry's hand. «You are safe, my little one.»

«Yes, Harry is my saviour.»

Fleur let go of Gabrielle and hugged Harry, pinning his arms at his side. When she let go, she gave him a kiss on each cheek. "Thank you!"

Harry blushed. He also saw Hermione and Ginny start to get angry. "Don't worry, I'm sure your sister will be fine." He shook his head to

his two older girls and they did not advance on the French champion, but they did not look happy either.

"Fleur!" her mother called sharply. "Come, let the nurse look at you and then I shall explain what happened."

While Fleur went through the same treatment at the nurse's hands, her mother asked, "What happened in the lake?"

Fleur said tearfully. "The Grindylows, they attacked me fiercely and prevented me from reaching Gabrielle." She looked at Harry. "Why did he rescue her?"

Her mother explained with a forced calm. "Headmaster Dumbledore miscast the spell on her and she woke under water and started to drown. Harry was able to rescue her because he reached the hostages so quickly." Only Mrs Delacour holding the girl back prevented her from coming over and hugging Harry again.

Madam Pomfrey was called and she hurried back out of the tent.

Mrs Delacour looked at Fleur. "My daughter, I must leave for a few minutes. Please stay here and watch over your sister, but please do not go over there."

"Mother?"

"I will explain very soon. For the moment, let Gabrielle sit by Harry and do not approach him yourself. Always keep Gabrielle between the two of you." She fixed Fleur with a stern look and the girl promised, even though Fleur looked like she thought the request was strange. "I will return shortly."

Mrs Delacour left quickly and Madam Pomfrey came in a few minutes later with Cedric and Cho Chang. Her routine with those two was very brief before the nurse went running back out of the tent.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"Krum. He made it there before I did, but he got hurt so I beat him back. He's going to need help when he gets out of the water," Cedric explained. "You surprised us again, Harry. How long did it take you?"

"Err, I think Bagman said nineteen minutes."

"He did," Hermione confirmed.

"Amazing. How did you do it?" Cedric asked. Cho and Fleur looked very interested in the answer.

"Well, I built a raft and shrunk it. Then I summoned my broom and some scuba fins to swim faster. I flew it all to the middle of the lake. From there, I did a Bubblehead Charm for about ten minutes." He shrugged. "I got lucky and was almost right over the village. Coming back was just the reverse except I had passengers."

Cho and Fleur looked impressed. Cedric laughed loudly. "Spectacular, Harry, truly spectacular. I bet they make it so you can't use your broom in the third task."

"We'll see," Harry said with a grin.

"Make way!" they heard. Pomfrey returned at a brisk walk, levitating Viktor Krum behind her. Everyone watched her deposit the boy on a bed and start working on his bleeding feet.

"What happened?" Harry blurted out.

"Mermen," Krum grunted before he hissed as Pomfrey worked on him.

Dumbledore came in, leading a bedraggled-looking Daphne

Greengrass.

Pomfrey looked up to see who was there. "Headmaster, dry her off and hand her a blanket and a Pepper-Up potion."

With a smile and a twinkle, Dumbledore casually followed the orders and made Daphne comfortable.

It took nearly twenty minutes, but Krum eventually got off the bed. He could walk again, but it was done gingerly. "Finish this ceremony as quickly as possible and then lay down for the rest of the day, Mr Krum. You need to stay off your feet for them to heal completely," Pomfrey admonished him.

Krum nodded. "I understand."

Dumbledore led them all back out towards the stands. Half the students were running around, but as the group from the tent came, the students quickly got back into the stands to hear the outcome.

Harry walked, keeping Gabrielle next to him. They continued wearing the blankets to hide their hands. Fleur walked on the other side of her sister. Hermione and Ginny followed, although they had to stop at the edge of the platform which held the judges, the champions, and the hostages.

Dumbledore put a Sonorus on himself. "Thank you for waiting patiently. The champions are healed, the judges have debated, and we can now reveal their scores.

"First to return was Harry Potter of Hogwarts. He rescued Mr Ronald Weasley and returned at the nineteen-minute mark. Additionally, he encountered Miss Fleur Delacour's hostage and found the Stasis spell to have malfunctioned, and therefore she was drowning."

Many gasped at that.

"The chief of the Merpeople confirmed that to me and that they did not know what to do. Fortunately, Mr Potter rescued her. For that, we award him an extra ten points, giving him sixty points for this task, and one hundred and five points total."

Everyone applauded.

"In second place for this task was Cedric Diggory of Hogwarts. He rescued Miss Cho Chang in fifty-nine minutes. He scored forty-seven points for this task and has eighty-two points total."

He received a lot of applause.

"Third to complete this task was Viktor Krum of Durmstrang. He rescued Miss Daphne Greengrass. Unfortunately for him, he did a self-transfiguration into a shark and the Merpeople attacked him to defend those who were underwater."

There were many gasps and mumblings.

"Fortunately, the wound was in his tail fin, which translated to his feet. He briefly changed back to his human self to show the Merpeople he was a champion, cut Miss Greengrass loose, and then changed back into a shark to tow her back. Since he arrived five minutes after the one-hour deadline, he only received thirty points, and has seventy points total."

Krum still received applause.

"In fourth place was Fleur Delacour of Beauxbatons. She was to rescue her sister, Gabrielle Delacour. Unfortunately, she ran into a large school of Grindylows and they prevented her from completing her task. For her effort, she received twenty points and has fifty-two points overall."

The applause was very polite. Harry could hear Fleur expressing her surprise that she had received any points at all.

"The final task of the Triwizard Tournament will be on the twenty-fourth of June. The champions' starting order will be determined by their total points, with one minute between each champion starting. The overall winner will be the one to reach the finish-line first, so starting later will make it harder to win, but it is still possible for anyone to win the Tournament.

"We are finished here for the day. Lunch should be ready soon, so please head into the Great Hall. Classes will resume after lunch. Quietus." Dumbledore looked very pleased.

Harry was glad this task was done and he wished the whole Tournament was over. He saw Mrs Delacour off to the side, by Hermione and Ginny, waving for Harry and Gabrielle to join them. He guided Gabrielle that way with Fleur following.

Mrs Delacour led them towards the Beauxbatons carriage. Fleur went in first to lead the way. Gabrielle went next and pulled Harry in after her. The two girls followed with the mother coming last.

Fleur led them into a small room with a twin-sized bed, desk, dresser, and two chairs. It was just like that used by Lucie, their French tutor. One of the chairs held a slightly over-weight man with dark hair and a pointed goatee. They crowded into the room.

Mrs Delacour took charge. "Harry, sit on the bed near the pillow; Gabrielle in his lap. Hermione, you sit next to Harry and Ginny, you're next to Hermione. Fleur, take the desk chair." She locked the door and put privacy spells on every wall before conjuring a chair in front of the door and sitting down.

"Apolline?" The man looked at her in confusion.

"Everyone, this is my husband, Jean-Aimé Delacour. You may call me Apolline, or I suppose 'mother' will work as well."

"Apolline? What is the meaning of this?" her husband asked again, a little more concerned this time.

She held up her hand. "Please be patient." She held out her hand towards Hermione. "This is Hermione..."

"Hermione Granger," the girl said.

"Ginny Weasley," the redhead said.

"And I'm Harry Potter." He looked at the man and the woman, wondering how hard this was going to be. At least they both appeared to speak fluent English, unlike Fleur's accented and sometimes improper English.

"Harry, do you understand your power?" the mother asked.

Part of him wanted to run and hide so he did not have to face the little girl's parents, but that wasn't going to happen. He was in a small room with Gabrielle's mother in front of the door while Gabrielle sat on his lap holding his hand on her stomach. As that last part went through his brain, he practically jumped and tried to remove his hand, but the little girl was stronger than she looked and he had no place to move his arm sitting against the wall. "Gabrielle, let go. You can't do that."

Apolline looked sternly at her youngest. "Gabrielle? What are you doing?"

The girl answered, «I am only making sure we keep contact.»

"And where are you keeping contact?" her mother asked firmly, unable to see under the blanket.

Gabrielle looked down and did not answer.

"She'd holding my hand against her stomach, and that's not right," Harry said, pleading for help and for it not to be held against him.

The father sat up in his chair, looking angrily at Harry.

"Jean-Aimé, wait! You need to understand what's going on first." Her stern look softened slightly as she turn back to the children. "Harry, as long as you don't move your hand, it's fine. Gabrielle, you will not move his hand. Promise." Mrs Delacour glared at the little girl. Gabrielle finally relented and nodded. "One problem at a time. Again, Harry, do you understand your power?"

"You mean about what happened?"

"I mean about how you can bond girls to you. Jean-Aimé!" Apolline reached out and grabbed her husband's arm. "Wait for the information. He cannot control it."

Harry looked at her with interest. "You understand what's going on?" Hermione looked even more interested.

The mother of his newest bond-mate sighed. "There is...what most think is an old Veela legend, but it is true. There are men born with a special power - a rare power - about once a century ... maybe more often, but some never find this power in themselves as they are never in the right circumstances. It is said that if such a man saves an unbonded and unmarried woman who is in mortal peril, he will - or rather his magic will - bond her to himself. There has been speculation that the power may appear in women as well, but it has never been confirmed."

"He has that power? He has bonded our little Gabrielle?" Jean-Aimé asked angrily.

"Yes, he has, but it is a fair trade," she told her husband grimly with an intent look.

"What? Have you lost your mind?"

"Would you rather Gabrielle be dead?" she asked pointedly, staring at him until he started to squirm in his chair. "I would rather this not have happened either, but I acknowledge that an alive-yet-bonded Gabrielle is better than a dead daughter." She looked at Harry. "I don't believe that I've said it yet, but thank you for saving my daughter, Harry."

"Uh, you're welcome, Mrs Delacour, uh, Mother." He dropped his head down on Gabrielle's shoulder. He was in such a horrible position. How did he get himself into situations like this, he asked himself rhetorically.

"Why should 'e call you 'muzzer'?" Fleur asked.

Apolline shook her head. "This is what I get for not keeping you at home all the time and teaching you everything myself," she said to herself, but everyone heard her. "Fleur, when he bonded her, it is for life and like marriage. They are not legally married, but they are magically married. Legal marriage will certainly come one day."

Gabrielle made a happy sigh and wiggled back against Harry, as if trying to find more contact with him.

"Hermione, you will have to watch her. She will try to take on more than she is ready for; it is in her nature. I also suggest you create a schedule for when each type of activity can happen by age and then firmly stick to it," Apolline suggested.

"We already have such a list for most activities," Hermione spoke up. "I will complete it and write out the list, as well as make Gabrielle

aware of it."

While Harry was not aware of a "list of activities", he was not surprised Hermione had one. It was actually bit mind-boggling.

"Thank you. I would like to review it with you later, as that will help me to sleep a little better." Appoline sighed deeply and looked for a moment as if she was going to be overwhelmed, before her expression turned to one of determination.

"Hermione, was it?" Jean-Aimé asked. The brunette nodded. "Why are you and ... Ginny here?"

"Because I bonded with Harry first, about three years ago."

"And I bonded with Harry about two years ago," the redhead answered.

"You have seen that much danger already at your age?" he asked Harry, his astonishment momentarily overcoming his anger.

"Yes, sir. Something seems to happen each year, although last year was the easiest of them all so far," Harry answered. "I only had to deal with Dementors a couple of times." The man leaned back in his chair to contemplate the idea of a boy that young seeing that much danger and living through it all.

"Can you briefly tell us your stories?" Apolline asked. She looked at Hermione.

"I'm a Muggle-born. In my first year, I was by myself and a mountain troll found me. Harry saved my life. We've been best friends ever since. My parents found out that Harry's relatives didn't really care for Harry, so they adopted him. We haven't told them about the bond yet because we didn't know what it was."

"I see, and thank you. Ginny?"

"My first year here I was given a diary which turned out to be possessed, but I didn't know that at the time," Ginny said, looking down. "It was trying to make me get Harry killed, but I fought it so he wouldn't get involved. Harry found out what happened and came and saved me from both the diary and a forty-foot basilisk."

"By Zeus and all the gods," Jean-Aimé softly swore.

"We bonded and became best friends, the three of us," Ginny finished rather weakly. "My parents also don't know about the bond."

Apolline shook her head. "We do not have time today, but one day I would like to hear those stories in detail."

"It's so simple," Fleur said very quietly to herself, but her mother heard her.

"Fleur, no! I forbid it!" Apolline stared at her oldest daughter, who stared back in shock at the outburst. "Can you not see how difficult this is for them to add a third, and you would try to make it worse by adding a fourth?"

"But the allure does not affect him..."

"Because he is bonded..." Apolline stopped and looked at the bed. All three young witches were bristling and Ginny had her hand on the end of her wand, which was half pulled out. "Look at them, Fleur. Look very closely. See what they think of your idea? They will defend him, hexing first before asking questions, even your sister."

"But..."

"No! There is a reason it is against the law in all magical countries to try to separate a magically-bonded couple. You must not interfere

with the bond. If they can show any way that your actions would hurt them, and this is trivially easy to do, the law is against you; and that does not take into account how much they would be against you if you tried to force yourself into the bond," her mother explained. "Swear now that you will not seek this."

Fleur looked to her father.

"I do not like oaths, but your mother is right. You must not interfere in any way. Swear your promise," he commanded her.

Accepting defeat, Fleur slowly pulled out her wand and swore to not try to join Harry's bond. She sat in her chair looking sadly at the floor.

"Another crisis diverted," Apolline said, shaking her head. "At least you are not that much older, Harry."

"I'm not sure I like being bonded to an eight- or nine-year-old; it's just not right," Harry said. "I'm sorry, Gabrielle."

«I am eleven!» the girl shouted at him as she twisted to glare at her new bond-mate.

Harry looked in confusion at Gabrielle's mother who slowly started to laugh. Looking at her father, he saw the man chuckling. Even Fleur had a small smile. He looked at Hermione and Ginny, but both of them looked as confused as he was.

"She can't be eleven," he replied, fully understanding what Gabrielle had said.

"I am sorry, Harry, but that was very funny to us, and you could not have anticipated your mistake unless you know a great deal about Veela. Jean-Aimé, your wallet please?"

"What? Oh, yes, I understand." He started digging in a pocket.

"What do you know about Veela?" Apolline looked at the three Hogwarts students as she waited on her husband. Two of them looked at the third, who in turn looked a little exasperated at always being the one expected to have the answers.

"Fine," Hermione said with some asperity. "I looked it up after the World Cup, if you must know... Veela are arguably the nearest non-exact-Human race. Some believe they are the missing link between birds and humans on the evolutionary tree - which would be bizarre - but whether that's true or not, they do have an avian aspect and can transform into that form when sufficiently motivated. When in that form, they can also produce fireballs wandlessly and are said to be fierce fighters. The Veela allure to catch a mate is also well known. While they can be found all over the world, most Veela live in continental Europe."

Apolline took her husband's wallet and started looking through it. "Your textbook was mostly correct, although it left several important facts out. Veela will tell you that we are not the missing link between man and birds." She pulled a picture out. "Fleur is a seventh-year student and is currently seventeen. Would you say she looks seventeen?"

Harry looked at the older sister, who looked at him and held her head up proudly. "Yes, seventeen, or maybe even eighteen or nineteen." Fleur smiled at him.

Her mother held the picture out for all to see. "Harry, how old is Fleur here?"

He studied the picture. "She looks a little younger, so I'd guess that was taken last year when she was sixteen."

Apolline grinned. "No, Harry. That was taken as she was starting her fourth year. She was only fourteen then." The Hogwarts three were

shocked. "I will be turning forty later this year, and yet some tell me I look like Fleur's older sister."

Harry blushed. "I thought you were when I first saw you."

She chuckled. "My point is that Veela do not age like full humans do. As you probably know, Witches and Wizards age a little slower and live a little longer than Muggles do; Veela are like that except ... more so. Part of it is our natural vanity and our magic sees to it that we look beautiful for as long as possible. Even ugly Veela, and there are a few, can look beautiful thanks to the Veela allure. That makes us highly desired as mates, even to the point that many try to enslave us. Therefore, magic makes us look very young and innocent for as long as possible because most people do not harm children."

"So, she really is eleven?"

Gabrielle gave him a look that clearly communicated that she was upset with him for not believing her.

"She is and her birthday was in October," her mother said with a smile.

"So, we're a little more than ... three years apart," Harry said slowly, as he worked out the time.

"That seems like a lot now, but in five years time when you're nineteen and she's sixteen and looks your age, you probably won't care. In ten years, you won't notice the age difference at all."

"So she'll age very quickly at some point?" Hermione asked.

"Yes," Appoline answered. "It starts this year, and I'm surprised I haven't seen evidence of it yet. I suspect this bonding may help start it going. By this time next year, she'll look her age of twelve. From there, she'll appear to age two years for every year she lives until

she's fifteen. Once she's fifteen or sixteen and looks eighteen, she'll hold that look for many years, appearing to age very slowly.

"If we were full-blooded Veela, Gabrielle would be hidden away for those three years for her protection so non-Veela couldn't get to her, to try to steal her away and force a bond on her. Headmistress Maxime has kept a very close eye on Fleur and all visitors to the school for security. Even so, we still almost didn't let Fleur go away to school. With this bond in place, there is very little risk to Gabrielle attending school."

"Do you know everything the bond can do or allows?" Hermione asked, trying to learn more.

"No, I'm afraid I don't. From what I've read, not much has been written about it. Most bonded tend to keep those details to themselves. However, I will research it when I next go home." Apolline looked at her husband. "We have some difficult decisions to make."

"Yeah, what do we do next?" Harry asked. "We've tried to keep this secret, but even I can see that will be hard with four of us now involved."

Apolline nodded. "It will be even more difficult because Gabrielle will need to stay close to you for the bond to strengthen. All bonds need that, and if it does not strengthen sufficiently, there will be difficulties later."

"Actually," Harry was happy to point out, "the need to touch will end after about twenty-four hours, so we just need to keep out of sight for that long. After that, we can act fairly normal."

Hermione looked horrified. "Oh no! We're about to miss our classes for the afternoon!"

Ginny rolled her eyes at her friend. "Hermione, we're in the middle of a life-changing event and you're worried about a few classes? I would think missing lunch would be at least as important if not more so."

Harry chuckled at his two bond-mates' different outlook on life and got two disparaging looks.

"Normally, you should be in class, but in this case, Ginny is correct. This is far more important, although we will need lunch, too. We're also going to have to decide what to do about the rest of this year. That may force us to tell that idiot Dumbledore and Headmistress Maxime." Apolline got three sour looks at that statement. "And, by what you've said, we probably need to tell your parents as well."

"We, uh..." Harry paused and looked at the two girls, who looked back at him. "We haven't told anyone else, but we were planning on telling our families this summer."

"Maybe now, or very soon would be better, Harry," Hermione said. "Besides being unsure if they would pull us out of this school, we didn't want to tell because we couldn't explain it, and now we can. I don't feel as good about withholding the information from them now that we know what this is."

Harry considered it for a moment. "I agree, we need to tell them. Also, we're ready to leave the school anyway."

Apolline looked at her husband, who looked back with a shrug, indicating it was up to her. "Things are getting very complicated and plans need to be made, plans that will involve your parents. I can make arrangements for that this evening or tomorrow."

All three Hogwarts students looked less than happy but nodded.

"Maybe tomorrow would be better," Hermione hesitantly suggested.

"It will be Saturday and my parents will not be at work then."

Apolline chuckled at the lack of enthusiasm. "We can put it off that long. What is the best way to contact them?"

The trio looked at each other. "Uh," Harry took the lead. "Perhaps it would be best to get hold of my godfather. He can get the others to his house. He really should be present as well."

"Good idea, Harry. Taking my mother to another house would restrain her - slightly," Ginny said with a slight wince.

"I guess I need to write a note and it can be delivered to Sirius." Harry looked over and Hermione and Ginny agreed.

"Very good. The next difficult question is how to keep all of you together, as Gabrielle is not a student of either school. She'll need to be in close proximity to all three of you, but to you in particular, Harry. Headmistress Maxime does not have the room for all of you to stay here. Do you think Dumbledore will allow Gabrielle to stay in the castle? Specifically, in your common area and with the girls at night for most nights?"

"I don't know," Harry said after a moment.

"We would have to explain about the bond for him to agree. Professor McGonagall should be there too, since she is our head of house," Hermione suggested.

"I don't like having to explain the bond to them," Harry said, "but I fear you're right."

"We'll need to get them to promise not to tell anyone until we register our bond," Ginny said. There was agreement on that.

"I'm sorry, Jean-Aimé, but I will need to spend some time here for the

next month or two to help Gabrielle. She will need to learn to speak at least minimal English as fast as possible, and I can help the three of you learn French more thoroughly." Apolline paused and tilted her head in thought. "I'll also need to work with all of you on learning about the bond. There may be more about it that you don't know. In many ways, you are the experts, but perhaps I can help guide you generally."

"What about next year?" Hermione asked. "We had planned to try to transfer to Beauxbatons, but we don't know if that's possible because Madame Maxime said we may not know enough French."

Jean-Aimé answered that question. "Apolline, as much as I don't like it, you may need to stay here for the rest of this year. That would allow you to teach them the French they need and Gabrielle English." He looked back at Hogwarts students. "If Headmistress Maxime will not accept you as transfer students into Beauxbatons, it is also possible for you to go to neither school and have private tutors. This is a decision for later, though. Or..." He trailed off and a smile slowly came over him.

"I recognize that look, husband. What are you thinking?" Apolline raised an eyebrow at him.

A trouble-making grin changed into a deep chuckle. He looked at the boy. "Harry, is it correct to say you'd prefer not to tell your Headmaster or any of the professors of this bond?"

"Yes," Harry said slowly, not sure how that would be possible.

"And the only thing keeping you at Hogwarts is this wretched Tournament, for which you were entered without a school name, and that you lack sufficient skill in French to transfer now?" the man queried.

"Yes, sir."

"Then the answer is quite simple," Jean-Aimé said, his trouble-making grin returning. "You shall transfer to 'the school of your Tournament' for the rest of the year and return here only for the third task as you are magically required to do so."

"But our classes..." Hermione said in horror.

Jean-Aimé waved the argument away. "Shall take place at our home with private tutors. There, you can use French full-time and be immersed in the culture. That will finish what you've started and you will be prepared for Beauxbatons next autumn. It will also remove you from the danger here and prevent people from asking about you and your bond because they will not see you daily."

"Could it really be that simple?" Harry asked Ginny. The redhead shrugged.

Hermione bit her bottom lip slightly as her brow furrowed. After thinking furiously for a moment, she smiled. "That's not against the rules of the Tournament." She shook her head. "I'm surprised I didn't think of something like this before. There are really only two problems and one of them is fairly easy to solve."

"Me," Ginny said.

"Yes," Hermione replied. She looked at the Delacours. "The Weasleys will probably not want to let Ginny change schools, but they have acknowledged a Life Debt to the House of Potter. Harry can call that Debt in and then Ginny will be his responsibility and he can take her to France with us."

Jean-Aimé looked slightly alarmed at that information.

Harry understood and did his best to give a reassuring smile. "As I told Hermione's father, I have no reason to do such a thing with you

as long as you treat your daughter with love and do not try to keep us apart. The Weasleys would, or at least Mrs Weasley would, so I was required to be more formal with them. You're suggesting we come live with you, not keep us apart, and I can tell you love your family."

The father looked relieved. "Thank you, Harry. We do love both of our daughters greatly." He looked back to Hermione. "And the more difficult problem?"

"Our parents," she said, pointing to Harry and herself. "They probably will be glad for us to get away from this school, but living in France will be problematic. They'll be happy that we can prepare for going to Beauxbatons next year, but they will miss us and want to see us."

Jean-Aimé chuckled. "That is rather easily solved with a permanent Portkey that goes between their home and our home. With that, they can come see you every weekend if they so desire." He looked at his wife.

"Of course," Apolline agreed. "They would be most welcome to visit anytime. We have plenty of room."

"I have certain - connections," the man said with a knowing smile, "and can make the necessary arrangements."

Harry looked pleased. "Then all that would leave is how to keep the knowledge of the bonds secret. I really don't want that to become public knowledge."

"Yes, I can understand," Apolline said. "If it happened, many young witches - and perhaps some not so young - would try to contrive a situation to produce a bond with you." She purposefully did not look at her oldest daughter, who hung her head anyway.

"Hermione and I prevented a bonding last year," Ginny told them, "but we may not be around him all the time to help. There needs to

be a way to keep this secret hidden."

Hermione gasped. "Could it really be that easy?"

"What?" Harry asked for all of them.

The brunette looked torn for a moment. "I need to research my idea. I could be wrong and I don't want to get your hopes up. For now, don't tell anyone about your power or about Gabrielle."

"Fine, I know you don't like to explain until you're sure," Harry said with resignation, knowing he would get no information out of her until she had done her research. "But how do we explain my absence while I'm here with Gabrielle?"

"A complication from the task and that I insisted you stay with my daughter until she calmed down from her frightening experience," Apolline said authoritatively. The mother looked at her older daughter. "Please find something for Harry to write with so he can write his note to his godfather requesting a meeting of the families. I will find the Headmistress and arrange for lunch here. Jean-Aimé, please head into Hogsmeade and make arrangements for a room for the weekend. We should have the basics worked out by then." She stood and Vanished her chair while Fleur pulled out writing things from the desk.

"Yes, dear, that is an excellent idea." Jean-Aimé Delacour stood and left.

"Fleur, please go and have lunch and then head to class. You will also not mention any of this to anyone outside of family," her mother said firmly.

"Of course, Mother." Fleur turned to her sister and ran her hand lightly over the younger girl's head. "I am 'appy for you, ma chérie." With that, she left as well.

"Harry, please write a letter to your godfather to arrange a time with the Weasleys and the Grangers about an important family matter late tomorrow morning. I would state it something like that, so as not to alarm them that someone is injured," Apolline suggest. "I'll find a Beauxbatons house-elf to deliver it and wait for an answer."

She turned to her younger daughter. «Gabrielle, I know we have mainly focused on your understanding English, but we now need to have you speaking it, too. From now on, you are not to use French unless there is no other way to tell me something, or unless you need to speak a few words to help Harry and the other mates learn French. Do you understand?»

"Yes...Mother," Gabrielle replied slowly, although her mouth looked like it had tasted something bad. With a smile, Appoline left, and the four were alone for the first time.

"All right, Gabrielle, I'm going to need to get up," Harry told the little girl on his lap. She frowned but let him up.

While Harry was trying to get to the desk, Hermione said, "Harry, you know this means the Headmaster failed to keep his promise. You had to rescue someone and you are not ending the year like you started."

Harry grinned. "True, although I wonder how much he will argue this doesn't count, or even if it does, how he'll fight to keep me here anyway."

"It's hard to say," Hermione replied. Ginny did not have a better answer.

As soon as he was sitting at the desk, Gabrielle stood behind him and touched his bare neck. Harry started writing the letter.

«Gabrielle? Please turn around and face us,» Hermione said firmly,

but not unkindly. «You can hold onto Harry, but we need to have a talk. Please tell me if I say something you don't understand. All right?»

"Yes."

"Hermione?" Harry said with a warning in his voice.

"Harry, write your letter. This is something that has to be said. Listen if you need to, but don't interfere," Hermione said firmly.

"I suppose you have a point. It's better to deal with this now rather than later." He turned back around.

«Gabrielle, you need to understand we,» she indicated Ginny and herself, «understand what happened and that it's not your fault. Dumbledore did the spell wrong and Harry had to save you or you would have died.»

«But we're still very unhappy anyway,» Ginny told her and got a nod. «I'm sorry you're starting this way, but it was that way for me, too. Hermione was upset when she found out I had bonded to Harry, but we worked through that and became friends.»

«We'll become friends too, but we need some time to get used to you joining us. Understand?» Hermione asked.

"Yes," Gabrielle said sadly.

«It's not all bad,» Hermione told her. «One of the things you'll learn is that the bond gives us all a measure of instant trust. Of course, trust does not mean that you'll instantly love us both or that we won't have arguments.»

Gabrielle raised her free hand. «I am not sure what you mean.»

«Hmm, how about... you'll learn that we will trust each other quickly. We'll learn to depend on each other very soon. There will not be feelings of 'like' and 'love' overnight. The feelings will come, but not in one day. We may sometimes yell at each other, but we will be friends again.»

Gabrielle nodded. "Yes."

«If you think about Harry very hard, you'll know where he is and how he's doing, like if he's feeling well or is hurt.»

"Yes."

«What else is there, Ginny? I know I'm forgetting something.»

«We're also able to borrow a little magic from Harry, and he can borrow or use a little from us. That will let you learn and do more powerful magic before you would normally be able to because your magical core has not finished growing,» Ginny explained.

"Yes!" Gabrielle's eye lit up in excitement.

«Great, another person who wants to steal my magic,» Harry complained good-naturedly. All three girls laughed, as he had intended.

«Oh, and another thing... like you noticed when Fleur came near Harry, you'll feel very... protective toward him. That can be with other girls, although if you know they aren't trying to do something to him, you won't feel so protective. But if you know they are after him or trying to be like a girlfriend with him, or if someone tries to hurt Harry, you'll need to take care not to start fighting without thinking about what is happening.»

"No!" Gabrielle threw her arms around Harry's neck from the back.

He smiled and patted her arms and her head. «It's all right, I understand because I'll feel very protective of you, too.»

Gabrielle gave a happy sigh and put her head next to Harry's for a moment. When she stood back up again, Harry turned and handed the letter to Hermione. «What do both of you think?»

Hermione and Ginny read the letter. «I think you should suggest a time at the end, but otherwise, I think it's about as good as it's going to get.»

«I agree,» Ginny said. «This is going to be hard, but we've known that for a long time. Of course, even if we would have told them at the beginning, it would have been hard. At least now we have Apolline to help explain.»

Harry suggested a time and signed the letter before he put it in an envelope that Fleur had left for him.

Apolline came back a few minutes later. "I'm pleased that there is not blood everywhere."

"Maman!" Gabrielle yelled, upset.

Her mother laughed. "Ma chérie, I was only teasing, but come everyone. There is an empty classroom for an hour that we can use to eat in, and the Headmistress is allowing us to stay here this evening without asking too many questions. Harry, do you have your letter completed?"

He handed it over before they left the room. A moment later, they were in a small classroom that would have only held about ten students, but it was big enough for them at the moment. A house-elf was setting out dishes of food. When the elf was done, Apolline handed the letter to the house-elf and talked to it in French before he popped out.

«That was a Beauxbatons elf?» Hermione asked.

«Yes. There are two here to assist. I suspect he will take the letter to one of the Hogwarts elves to help him find your Sirius Black. Please eat; my husband will join us when he returns shortly.» Apolline started to serve herself and the students followed her example.

The students filled Apolline and Gabrielle in on facts about them and what their families were like. Harry did not mention the Dursleys. He would discuss that with Gabrielle later, when they were alone.

Jean-Aimé returned when they were half done.

The Headmistress found them as they were finishing lunch. "Is everything all right?" She was looking mostly at Harry, although she also glanced at Hermione and Ginny too.

"Yes, Headmistress Maxime," Apolline answered. "We're still dealing with the emotional impact of the task and we thank you for your willingness to help. I will explain more later and we thank you for your patience."

The Headmistress looked at them thoughtfully. "Lucie will not be needed as a tutor any longer, will she?"

Harry was surprised at that and wondered just how much the Headmistress suspected. It was obvious the woman knew something unusual had happened. "Probably not, but I'll tell her if you don't mind."

"Of course, Mr Potter. I'm sure we'll talk later."

As the Headmistress left, Harry understood her comment was not just a nicety, but she wanted to know what was going on. He was not surprised by her request and felt she deserved to know, if it was

possible.

When they finished lunch, Hermione and Ginny promised to be back in a couple of hours before heading off to class. Apolline and Jean-Aimé left to take care of preparations for the change.

Harry and Gabrielle headed back to Fleur's room and took a nap, where Gabrielle gave him a cute winning smile before snuggling into him. Harry just shook his head, already understanding how she was going to wrap him around her little finger. With chagrin, he thought she would almost certainly succeed.

((A/N: All the French was courtesy of Babelfish. Yep, I changed one point of the story from JKR's version, in letting Gabrielle "wake up" while underwater. Harry rescued her in the book, and I felt that was justification for the change so he would rescue her in this story. The premise of the story is that Harry will bond every girl he rescued in the books, and I think the rescue of Gabrielle in the books was close enough to count. Even though she probably wouldn't have died in the book, I put her in a fatal situation here to make it obvious. :-))

You've seen some problems with having the bond in the past. Now that a third is added, you'll see that being bonded has more negatives - logistically if nothing else. For those who are wondering why I let Gabrielle be added, I had to do so to be true to the premise of my story.))

Chapter 21 - Integrating Number Three

Harry awoke with a small start, feeling someone shook shake his foot. He looked around to find Apolline smiling at him, and at her daughter who was still snuggled into him. "It is time to wake up," she said quietly. "Your other mates will be here soon."

Gabrielle startled Harry, who had not realised she was already awake, by replying so fast he could hardly keep up. «Mother, I think I understand what we will do, but I'm still worried it will not work and I will not be with Harry.»

Her mother smiled caringly. «You have nothing to be worried about. Everything will work out.

«Now, while you were taking your nap, I went to a few Muggle bookstores in Paris as the Wizarding bookstores did not have what I wanted. I found a couple of books on learning English for you, Gabrielle, and one on teaching English that I'll read. We will start on this tomorrow. I also bought a few potions that help you remember things better for a short time, so we'll use those at the beginning to try to give you a lot of experience quickly; then when the potions wear off, the experience and knowledge should stay with you.»

She was interrupted by a knock on the door which she opened to reveal Hermione and Ginny. The two looked resigned, but at least they did not look unhappy anymore.

There was a short silence after they came in. "Err, hi," Harry said, clearing his throat. "How was class?"

"It was fine," Hermione said. "People asked where you were and I told them you had something else to take care of after the task. They seemed to accept that. You're going to need to show up for dinner to prevent people from wondering too much, though."

"Uh, OK. I guess Gabrielle will have to sit next to me like you did," Harry thought out loud.

"That would probably be best. Also, I was thinking that it might be best to ask Professor McGonagall to come and get you at the end of dinner and tell you there was a family issue about the Tournament that you needed to take care of. That would allow other people to hear, so you wouldn't be missed tonight or tomorrow morning. That's assuming we can convince Professor McGonagall to help."

"That's a good idea, Hermione. Then we can use the same sort of excuse to help you and Ginny get away tomorrow as well?" Harry asked.

"Probably," Hermione agreed.

"Having our stories straight is always good." Apolline told them. She looked at Hermione. "Did your research show you what we need?"

Hermione brightened. "Yes! I talked to Professor Flitwick about it, without telling him what this was for, and he agreed it would work. He also gave me the spell without me having to get into the restricted section to find it."

"And what is it?" Harry asked, wondering when she would get to the actual answer.

"When Ginny said we needed to keep the secret hidden, that made me think of your parents, Harry, and then the answer was so simple," she said excitedly.

"Hermione," Harry growled lightly.

"The Fidelius charm, Harry," she said brightly. "It hides the secret of something or somebody from everyone who is not specifically told, and those who are told can't tell anyone that does not already know."

Professor Flitwick also said that the magic essentially prevents anyone who doesn't know the secret from even guessing it. So even if we make a mistake and act too friendly around people, they won't think we're bonded because the magic won't let them. Magic will push them to come up with some other explanation, like Notice-Me-Not charms do."

"That means," Ginny picked up the explanation, "that we can tell my family, even my mother and Ron, and they will know why we're together, but they'll never be able to tell anyone outside of the family."

Apolline looked very thoughtful. "Exactly how would that work? I mean, who will perform the charm, who will hold the secrets, and how do you plan to tell people?"

"Well," Hermione looked a little embarrassed now. "We were hoping you could do the charm, actually. Because the secret is not known by many people, it shouldn't take too much power. Professor Flitwick said the bigger the secret is, and the more people that already know it, the more power it takes to cast. So if you could cast the charm on each of us, since we each have a secret to keep, that would hide what we need and with the few number of people who know now then it shouldn't take too much power. I think we might want to write the secret down so it's easy to tell people exactly and we can't be overheard. That will also mean that we'll want to charm the parchment secret so it will be hidden too. We can each be the other's secret keepers."

The French woman thought about that. "So, to use an example to make sure I understand... I use the Fidelius charm to hide the knowledge of the bond between Harry and Gabrielle..."

"Yes," Hermione interrupted, "and you could make Gabrielle the secret keeper so only she could tell people about it."

"And then we perform the charm one more time, but this time on the

parchment that holds the secret she needs to tell people about the bond. Who becomes that secret keeper?"

"I do," Harry said firmly. "Since the secret affects both of us, that means it takes both of us to reveal it."

"Probably, but not technically true, Harry," Hermione said. "If Gabrielle can remember the secret key, then she can tell people on her own, but since the secret key will not be short and she won't be saying it often, you're probably right."

"Who's the keeper of my secret?" Harry asked.

"Whoever you want, but it should probably be one of us," Hermione said hesitantly, understanding this was tantamount to asking Harry to pick a favourite among them. "We should also do this as soon as possible."

"May I see the spell please?" Apolline asked, holding her hand out. Hermione gave it to her and she read it through carefully. "I've never heard of this, but it doesn't seem too hard. I believe we need to come up with the secret keys first before I try this."

They all worked on what their secret key should be, the girls talking together about what they wanted in it.

Hermione also told them, "Professor Flitwick said the magic allows people who know the secret to talk about it with others who also know, so only the facts we want to keep secret have to be in the key."

Harry looked over Hermione's shoulder as she finished and read:

Hermione Jean is magically bonded to Harry James Potter and is his magical wife. They are bound by magic and by love, never to be magically separated. They share magic, knowledge of the other, and will protect each other against all others not of the bond.

"That's not as long or as complicated as I expected it to be," Harry commented.

"It is the bare minimum."

The other girls finished theirs, with the same basic facts, but worded differently. Hermione thought that was good so that if someone knew one secret, they could not automatically guess the other secrets - if that was even possible.

Apolline pulled her wand out. "I'd do Gabrielle first, but that might cause problems with my husband not being here. Hermione?"

Hermione nodded and handed her parchment over.

Apolline gathered her magic and concentrated on the hiding charm. She then cast the charm using the secret key. A golden mist coalesced on the tip of her wand and then shot into Hermione. The woman stumbled back a step and then sank into the chair behind her. "That was powerful. I need to rest for a few minutes, but how do we know if the spell worked."

Hermione turned to Ginny. "Ginny, do you know anything special about me and Harry?"

"You mean that you're bonded like Harry and I are, as is Gabrielle?" she said with a smirk.

"Grr!" growled Hermione. "That means it didn't take."

"Wait, you're bonded like Gabrielle is?" Apolline asked, looking confused.

"But..."

Harry chuckled. "It's working fine, Hermione. You just asked the wrong person."

Hermione looked puzzled as she thought about it.

"Apolline, look at the parchment in your hand and read it carefully," Harry told her.

The woman did and then a look of understanding came over her. "I remember now. Yes, you are bonded to Harry just like my daughter."

Hermione shot Harry an "explain" look just before a look of understanding hit her. "Oh, I think I understand now. The spell caster forgot and only the secret keeper should know it now, except that we," she waved her hand at him and her bond-mates, "are an exception because we're part of the secret. It's just like how I can open the training room door that's keyed to your magic."

Gabrielle looked at her mother, who translated what Hermione said into French. «But I'm not bonded to her and I knew,» Gabrielle argued, pointing to Hermione but looking at Harry.

"Yes, but you're still part of the bond. You're hiding one part, but we're still a whole - or so it seems to me," he finished with a shrug. "The real test will be to finish hiding the secrets for Ginny and Gabrielle and then see if Fleur knows anything other than about my power."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, that makes sense - a surprise, but it does make sense. I was taking the spell description too literally at first."

"Are you ready to do the same for Ginny?" Harry asked Apolline.

"I believe so." She took Ginny's secret and did the spell again. A wave of tiredness came over her and she had to sit back down. Ginny prompted the woman to read the parchment she held in her hand and as before the older woman understood what she had just

done.

"I wish my husband was here for this last one, but we shall have to tell him tonight, or he shall wonder why he's staying in Hogsmeade." Apolline took the secret from her daughter and performed the spell one last time. At the end, she sank into the chair. "I swear I'm not getting up from here for at least half an hour."

Gabrielle giggled as she made her mother read her secret key.

Harry took the parchment describing the spell and handed it to Hermione. "Do you think you can do this?"

"I think I can do this if I draw on your power, Harry."

Harry nodded and handed Hermione his secret key. His key phrase was much like theirs, explaining the bond from his point of view to a witch he was bonded with, but it also explained how he bonded to single witches, so as to hide that knowledge.

Hermione did the charm and after the golden light shot into Harry, she all but fell onto the bed behind her. "That spell uses a lot of power."

Turning to his newest mother-in-law, he asked, "Do you know that I'm magically bonded to Gabrielle?"

"Yes," she answered. "But how did you do it, Harry? I feel like I should know, but I can not think of how." She suddenly pulled her wand. "Wait, you didn't use any of the Dark rituals, did you? If you did..."

"Stop!" Hermione shouted. "Mrs Delacour, read this before you do anything else."

Apolline kept her wand trained on Harry, but took the parchment from

Hermione and slowly read it. As she reached the end, she lowered her wand and put it away. "I'm sorry, Harry. I can fully understand the power in the hiding charm now."

The door to the room was opened and Fleur walked in. "What are you all doing 'ere? Mother, why did you let them in? They have no reason to be 'ere." She put her hand to her forehead as if suddenly dizzy. "But I remember them being 'ere before and it was right. I ... I'm so confused."

"Come in, ma chérie, I will explain." Apolline made Fleur sit down while Hermione recast the privacy spells. They showed the girl all of the secrets so her knowledge would be restored.

Jean-Aimé returned a few minutes later, also confused. They repeated the sharing process with him.

Hermione looked at her watch. "It's almost time for dinner and we need to put in an appearance. How do we get Harry back out here later for Gabrielle? I don't think we need to tell the Headmaster our secrets now."

"I will take care of it," Apolline said. "Come, let's go to the castle."

Jean-Aimé went to his room in Hogsmeade while everyone else walked to the castle.

Apolline frowned when she noticed Harry and Gabrielle holding hands. "That won't do." Faster than her daughter could protest, she picked Gabrielle up and put her on Harry's back, where the girl wrapped her arms around his neck. "Play big brother, Harry. Gabrielle can touch your neck this way." She then led them out of Fleur's room and the carriage.

They passed several of the Beauxbatons students on the way to the castle. They pointed at Harry and Gabrielle and laughed.

"See?" Apolline said softly when they were alone again. "Make the absurd look natural and there will be no problems."

Walking into the Entrance Hall, some of the Hogwarts students laughed good-naturedly at Harry. Used to the attention, Harry ignored it; Gabrielle giggled. Hermione and Ginny walked behind and shook their heads at the pair's antics.

In the Great Hall, they took a seat at the Gryffindor table. Gabrielle sat on Harry's left, between him and Hermione. Hermione whispered to the girl about how to sit at the table so Harry could touch her bare ankle, allowing them both to eat and look mostly normal. They also noticed that Apolline was having a quiet conversation with Professor McGonagall.

Ron and Neville came in and took a seat on the other side of the table from Harry.

"Harry, where have you been?" Ron asked as he started to dish food onto his plate. Neville looked interested in the answer too.

"Oh, I was having to take care of a few things for the Tournament. Explanations and such for having rescued two people instead of one," he said with an easy grin, surprised at how easy it was to stretch the truth.

Both boys accepted the statement without questioning it. Instead they looked at Gabrielle. "Why is she here?" Ron asked and pointed to the little girl with his fork.

"Gabrielle is sitting here because we've become good friends. I've also promised to help teach her magic and English, while she teaches me more French," Harry explained.

"I thought she was only here for the task," Neville commented.

"Originally, but she and her mother want to spend a little time with her sister," Harry made up.

His friends bought the story and started talking about what had happened to each of the champions in the Tournament. Harry told them what it was like under water.

Ron made a big deal about his part. Harry did not bother to correct his friend, since their friendship was still very newly healed and it kept the focus away from Gabrielle. A glance at Hermione and Ginny showed they did not fully believe Ron either. Gabrielle listened but did not say anything, in French or English.

As they finished dinner, Apolline came over. "Harry, since you're done eating, you should get a change of clothes, and then I'll escort you home."

"Where are you going?" Ron asked. Neville looked a little curious, but he also looked questioningly at Ron for asking something that was clearly none of his business.

"I need to go talk to my parents about the Tournament. I don't want them to freak out when they read the Daily Prophet tomorrow. Not sure when I'll be back though, it could be tomorrow evening," Harry said casually, trying to not make a big deal out of it.

Gabrielle spoke up for the first time. Slowly, she said, "Me come?"

Harry looked down at her with a grin. "You want to come see where I stay?"

"Yes," she said brightly.

"Sure." He looked at her mother. "I guess we'll meet you by the carriage when I walk her back?"

Apolline agreed with a nod as she waited.

Hermione and Ginny left with him and Gabrielle. Ron stayed and ate more pie. Neville stayed as well, understanding that his presence was probably not wanted at the moment.

Once they were alone in the entrance hall, Harry spoke quietly to Apolline, "I'm surprised Professor McGonagall let you take me home. I would have thought she would have insisted on doing that."

She broke into a mischievous grin. "That's what I told your friends as I thought they would accept it more readily. However, I told your professor there was a complication from this morning between you and my daughter, and you had volunteered to come and stay with her, under my supervision, for the evening while we worked that out."

Hermione's eye went a little wider as she realized the woman had essentially lied to her Head of House. Ginny grinned and seemed to be holding in a giggle. Gabrielle's reaction was very similar to Ginny's. Harry chuckled and shook his head as he turned and led his group toward Gryffindor Tower.

All three girls followed Harry up to his dorm room. Gabrielle looked around wide-eyed with wonder.

«The girl's rooms are about the same,» Hermione told the girl while Harry quickly packed a few things in his book bag.

Gabrielle looked in Harry's trunk when she saw Harry put his shrunken broom back in. She pointed to it. "Fly Quidditch?"

«Yes, I'm the Seeker for our Quidditch team. Do you fly too?» he asked her. She nodded excitedly.

"Great," mumbled Hermione, "I'm outnumbered, three flying fanatics

to one."

Ginny laughed.

Harry was glad to see his other girls acting more like their normal selves. He closed and locked his trunk before handing his bag to Gabrielle. «Hold this for a minute please. I'll hold your hand again very soon.» She pouted a little, but let go of his hand and took his bag.

He walked over to Ginny and pulled her into a hug. "Hey, I know today has been difficult, and tomorrow will be too, but I promise to spend some time with just you very soon. Everything will work out, I promise." He then kissed her, which Ginny eagerly returned.

When they broke apart, he moved over to Hermione and pulled her into a hug and told her the same thing. She kissed him and he returned it.

Harry let Hermione go and turned to Gabrielle to get his bag and to hold her hand again.

"Kiss," she said.

With a grin, he leaned down and kissed her cheek.

"No! Kiss!" she insisted.

Harry pulled her in for a hug, her head to his chest. "Sorry, but you're going to have to wait until you are, uh..."

«Thirteen,» said Hermione.

«Yeah, wait until you're thirteen, just like Ginny is now,» Harry told her.

"No," Gabrielle said with a pout and a very serious glare as she stamped her foot.

Harry grabbed her hand to lead her out. «No getting angry about kisses or I won't kiss you until you're fourteen.»

She looked like someone had just kicked her kitten. "Please?" she pleaded sorrowfully.

«Sorry, but I can't kiss a girl on the lips who looks like she's nine; it's wrong for me,» Harry explained. «Even if you looked eleven, I still couldn't do it. You'll have to wait.» Gabrielle looked unhappy, but did not say anything else, so he led them out of the room.

Hermione and Ginny walked with them to the front doors, where they bid Harry a wistful good-night.

Apolline met them at the carriage door and led them in. Fleur's room had already been rearranged. The bed had been expanded to stretch wall to wall width-wise in the small room. The other furniture had been shrunk down. There was not much walking room at the end of the bed, as the room had only been eight feet by twelve, and the bed was now eight feet by seven.

Harry dropped his bag, pushing it under the bed with his foot, and looked at his newest "mother".

"Fleur is spending time with friends. I shall be visiting with the Headmistress for a couple of hours to inquire about tutors and smooth a few things over. You may visit in here and get to know one another, although I suspect you'll do most of the talking Harry," she said with a smile. "Perhaps you can teach Gabrielle a little English too."

"Err, OK," he said as she left.

He took his shoes off and crawled up on the bed. Gabrielle kicked off her shoes and followed him, sitting between his legs and leaning back against his chest. She grabbed his hand and put it on her bare stomach after she lifted her shirt. Harry froze for a second before remembering they had done this earlier today. He vowed to himself to make sure that his hand did not move.

"Um, story?" she asked, snuggling in.

"All right." Harry started telling the story of his life as simply as he could, using French when necessary, leaving some details out that she really did not need to hear until she was a couple of years older. He finished that and the girl hugged him tightly with a sad look. "Thanks," he told her.

"English," she told him.

"Err, all right, but first, I think I'm going to start calling you Gabi. Is that OK?"

She thought about it for a moment before smiling. "Yes. Ga-bi."

He chuckled and then started to work on English with Gabrielle, having to use French to explain sometimes. By the time Apolline returned, he had convinced her to say all sentences with a noun and a verb and gave some examples of simple sentences and he made her say them. She seemed to catch on quickly with only a few mistakes.

"It's time for bed. Harry, there are two bathrooms to the left at the end of the hallway. You may use either one."

"I'll be back in a minute, Gabi."

"Yes," she said. After she let go of his hand, she added, "Hurry."

Harry came back several minutes later and found Gabrielle and her mother had changed into pyjamas in the room. Gabrielle ran down the hall and quickly used the bathroom before bedtime.

"You have the far left side, Harry. Gabrielle will be next to you. Then it will be me and Fleur will be on the far right side." Apolline shooed them into bed as Fleur came in, also dressed in pyjamas and holding her clothes. Her mother pointed her to her assigned spot.

Harry was embarrassed when Gabrielle did not lie down and only hold his hand, but snuggled up next to his chest, spooning into him as he lay on his side, her back to his front. She held his hand in front of her. He heard a chuckle and mentally cringed some more.

"Do not worry, Harry, I know nothing will happen and I expected her to do that. However, please make sure it goes no further. Sleep well my children." Apolline turned off the lights.

Harry woke feeling very warm and comfortable. It only took a split second for him to realize that the biggest reason for that was a small body pulled up against his front. Without moving, he carefully evaluated where his hands were. His left was free, as his arm was fully stretched out; her head was on his arm, treating it like a pillow. His right arm was curled around her and they were holding hands. He felt relieved.

Now that he knew he was not in trouble, he opened his eyes. Disengaging his right hand from Gabrielle's, he reached up and grabbed his glasses to put them on. He felt the discomfort of not touching his newest mate. It was a little less than yesterday, but still strong enough that he wanted to resume the touch. Apparently Gabrielle could also feel it in her sleep as she started to stir. He quickly grabbed her hand again and she settled back down, her breathing slowing again.

Next, he looked up slightly and saw her mother. She was still asleep,

hair splayed over her pillow. If Gabrielle took after her mother, and Harry thought she would based on current resemblance, she would be very pretty when she was grown.

A slight movement caught his attention, so he looked up some more. He noticed a sad-looking, or at least resigned, Fleur sitting with her back against the other wall watching them. Looking at his sister-in-law, to his chagrin, he realized her pyjamas must be made of silk and were quite thin, given the evidence on her chest. He could not help the blush of embarrassment that came over him, as well as the reaction in his crotch - which made his embarrassment even worse. What if Gabrielle woke now?

Fleur's chest jiggled very nicely as she silently laughed; he realized she had seen him look at her and then blush. That was making his other problem worse and he feared it would wake Gabrielle up. Being betrayed by his own body was a nightmare.

Closing his eyes for a minute and thinking of what he needed to do today and how Molly Weasley would probably react cooled his hormones and took care of his problem before Gabrielle woke.

Opening his eyes and being careful to look Fleur directly in the face, he saw that she was smirking at him. "Time?" he whispered.

Her smirk not lessening, she held up seven fingers and moved her eighth one a little.

He nodded slightly, taking that to mean a little after seven. Closing his eyes again, so he would not be tempted to look at Fleur's chest, he rested. It was not worth going back to sleep, as the alarm should be going off soon. Hermione and Ginny were supposed to meet them here at half past eight.

Thinking of his other two mates, he wondered what he would do if one of them was snuggled up with him now. The thought of doing

anything with an eleven-year-old, especially one that looked only nine, turned his stomach. But what if this was Ginny? She was only one year younger than he was. After a moment, he decided he would not do anything with her. She was only thirteen.

But Hermione was actually almost a year older than him and fifteen now. Would he consider exploring with her? After a few minutes of soul searching, he decided the right thing was not to take advantage of a situation with her. Immediately, the question of "But what if she offered?" came to mind. Or what if she took his hand and put it up under her shirt like Gabi had tried to do? He was not so sure he could hold out in that case. His hormones would certainly cloud any effort he made to behave. He knew he should abstain, but could he?

The alarm went off, preventing him from answering that question. Fleur shut off the alarm. Gabrielle stretched and twisted. She gave him a bright smile. Despite her messed up hair, she was so cute it should have been illegal. Since he was enjoying looking at her, before he could stop her, she moved up and gave him a quick peck on the lips.

"Eww," she said with a scrunched up face. "Stink."

Harry had to smile and he heard two other chuckles. He reached up for his wand and did a quick mouth freshening charm on himself that Sirius had taught him. To be nice, he did the same charm on Gabrielle.

"Mmm," she said with a pleasant grin and then quickly kissed him again. "Good," she pronounced.

He blinked both eyes, surprised she had caught him unawares twice. "Gabi, no. Kisses on the lips don't come until thirteen," he admonished her, trying to frown at least a little; but she was already starting to pout and he was having trouble being upset with her.

"Very right," her mother said. "Be good or I'll send you to Grand-ma-ma's away from Harry for a week."

Gabrielle twirled quickly. "No, no, no," she pleaded, sounding hurt. "Harry stay."

"I do not want to send you away, but I will if you do not behave." Apolline sat up and swept the hair out of her face. "Harry, if you will take your things to the bathroom and change, we will get dressed here. Please take at least ten minutes."

"No. Harry hurry," Gabrielle begged.

"I must have time to adjust the room and all three of us have to get dressed. You will be fine, my daughter. Harry, if you would?" Apolline looked at him expectantly.

"Err, right. I'll return soon, Gabrielle," he told her as he let go of her hand and crawled out of bed. Grabbing his bag, he left the room for the bathroom. Because he had time, he took a shower before dressing for the day.

As soon as he returned, Gabrielle quickly grabbed his hand, giving a little sigh. She led him to the bed, which was now the width of a bench. The other furniture had been restored to full-size. Apolline and Fleur were fixing their hair and applying a touch of make-up.

Apolline stopped after a moment with a smile. Digging in a bag, she pulled out a small box and handed it to Harry. "Please use this to work with Gabrielle. It works best when a non-Veela uses it." She went back to fixing her hair.

Harry opened the box and found a teardrop-shaped stone, about the size of the end of his thumb, strung on a gold chain. It was an aquamarine colour with a few gold flakes that appeared to be suspended in the rock. "What is it?" he asked in awe as he pulled it

out. When the stone touched his hand, it started to glow a little.

Apolline smiled as she saw it work and returned to her process of getting ready, talking as she did. "The Veela call it a Capture Stone. They are very rare and the process of creating one is highly guarded by the Veela Council. I can only borrow it for a year and then I must give it back. If you ever see one in the hands of a non-Veela, Harry, you are authorized to do whatever you must to retrieve it and then give it to me so I can return it to the Veela Council."

"Why? What does it do?" He was still staring at it in amazement, turning it slightly as he looked.

"We use it for the training of young Veela, which you can help me do while you wait. However, the reason you must retrieve any you find is because it can also be used to ensnare Veela. By international law, they are illegal and contraband to all others," she explained.

"But if they are illegal..."

"They are illegal for non-Veela. I am here and an appointed representative as an adult Veela. For the moment, hold it in front of Gabrielle so the stone touches you," she instructed him and turned to her younger daughter.

«Gabrielle, you are to feel your power, your inner-Veela. Control that power and make it diminish so the glow of the stone dims. When you do that, your Veela allure also dims.»

"Yes," the girl said as a look of concentration came over her while she stared at the stone.

"I don't understand. What is it doing? What is she doing?" Harry asked.

"The stone acts as a magnet for Veela allure. The glow shows that it

is capturing her allure magic. Her exercise is to learn to control her allure and be able to turn it off, so she does not affect people in public. Since she is starting to mature, this is becoming an issue and why we have started this training very recently. I believe her bonding will cause this maturing to speed up a little, making this training more important."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..." he said hurriedly.

"You are not responsible for your magic existing, Harry. You could not change this any more than you could change that you are a wizard," she said as she put the final touches on her make-up and began to put her things away. "Really, your skills are not so very different from being a Veela - it is something you are born with and have no say over. It would be wrong for me to resent you for that, when we are a family of Veela who have similar magics that cause others to treat us differently. The main difference is that we can learn to control our Veela magic whereas you cannot control your bonding power."

Harry considered what she had said. Her comments helped explain to him some of why she was so accepting of the situation, something he did not think either the Weasleys or his adoptive parents would take so well. "So, the stone is dangerous and can ensnare Veela because it can steal their allure, removing that as a weapon?" he asked, not quite sure he understood.

"That is correct. We are not helpless with one of those around, but it does prevent us from using our Veela powers, like the allure and our fireballs. We become much easier to defeat. But as I said, those stones are very tightly controlled." She sighed. "Nevertheless, a few do occasionally wind up outside of our control."

Harry nodded, understanding now. He noticed that Gabrielle was making the stone slowly waver. The training also appeared to be tiring her out quickly. Harry dropped the stone back into its protective box. "I think that's enough for now." Gabrielle gave him a big smile of

thanks.

«That is good, my daughter. You are getting better. We will work on that for the next few months until you can consciously control yourself for long periods of time with ease.» Apolline saw that Fleur was ready. "It is about time to leave. We will have breakfast with my husband and go from there. This might be a good day to catch up on your studies, Fleur."

"Yes, mother," the older girl said dutifully.

Still holding Gabrielle's hand, Harry walked out of the carriage. Hermione and Ginny were there and waiting. He smiled and looked at Gabrielle. "Wait for just a minute." Letting go of her hand, he gave each of the other girls a quick hug and a whispered "Good Morning". Taking the little Veela's hand again, he led the group towards Hogsmeade in the quiet of a Saturday morning, when most people at the school were still asleep on a day when they could.

At the Three Broomsticks, they found Jean-Aimé waiting. He led them to a back room where they could have some privacy. Breakfast was already waiting.

"Did you have any trouble?" he asked with a smile and a glance at Harry.

"None at all," Apolline answered. "Did you?"

"My only trouble was missing you," he said with a roguish smile.

"Eww," Gabrielle said. Everyone laughed, causing the girl to stick her tongue out at them.

After breakfast, Harry led them back to the main room. Having already told them the location they needed to use, and knowing that Sirius should have already added the Delacours to the access list, he

used the Floo Network to travel to his godfather's house.

Sirius grabbed Harry as he came out of the fireplace, preventing him from falling on the floor. "Harry!"

Harry gave him a hug. As he let go, the fireplace belched out Hermione and then Ginny in rapid order. Harry lent a hand to each. A moment later, Gabrielle, Apolline, and then Jean-Aimé came out.

"Sirius, I'd like to introduce you to the Delacour family." Harry held out a hand toward each as introduced. "Jean-Aimé, his wife Apolline, and their daughter Gabrielle. This is Sirius Black, my godfather and head of House Black."

"Feel free to call me Sirius," he said as he shook Jean-Aimé's hand.

"And please, I am Jean-Aimé. It is good of you to host this meeting in your home," Jean-Aimé said with bow from the neck.

Sirius took each of the Delacour ladies' hands as they held them out and he kissed them with his breath, causing Gabrielle to giggle.

"It's my pleasure." He gave Harry a mischievous grin. "So Harry, what is this about? Your letter was so very vague."

Harry grinned back. "If you'll go and fetch the Grangers, you can find out."

"Spoilsport," Sirius shot back good-naturedly. "Harry, please play host and take them to the formal living room. Ginny, if you would be so good as to wait here. Your parents should arrive in a few minutes."

As Sirius left, Harry glanced at Ginny, who nodded and said, "I'll take care of it."

Harry led the Delacours and Hermione into the living room where

Hermione and Gabrielle took the largest couch. Harry started to serve tea. As he finished pouring for those present, Ginny led her parents in. By the look on her face, Harry thought she was already working to restrain her temper, causing him to wonder what could have been said in such a short time.

"Mr and Mrs Weasley, good morning. If you'll have a seat on that settee, we'll get started in a moment," he said as politely as he could.

"Harry, what is this about? Sirius said it was important that we come over today to talk," Molly said a little forcefully. She also looked at the Delacours, obviously wondering who they were and why they were here.

"If you'll be patient for just a few minutes..."

The Grangers and Sirius walked in at that moment.

"Mum! Dad!" Hermione jumped up and ran over to her parents as Sirius took a wingback chair.

Harry handed out the rest of the tea and then hugged his parents.

"I'm glad to see you survived the second task without any injury," his mother told him.

"Thanks," he told her with a slight blush, knowing he left a lot out of that answer.

When he went to sit down, the girls were all standing. Gabrielle guided him to the centre seat where she pushed him down before seating herself on his left, pressed against him. Hermione sat on Gabrielle's left and Ginny closely on his right. Gabrielle also threaded her fingers through his. He was trapped in his seat.

"Why do I have the feeling there is much more here than meets the

eye?" Emma said softly, although she was heard by all, as she looked the teens over.

"Perhaps introductions are in order first?" Sirius asked, looking at Harry.

Harry cleared his throat. "Yes. Probably a good idea. Uh, I believe you all know Sirius over there, as well as Hermione and Ginny. On the settee are Arthur and Molly Weasley, Ginny's parents. And on the other couch are Dan and Emma Granger, Hermione's parents and who are also my adoptive parents. Unknown to most of you, sitting in the chairs are Jean-Aimé and Apolline Delacour. They are the parents of Gabrielle, who is sitting with me, and Fleur, who is the Triwizard Tournament champion representing Beauxbatons and who you've probably read about in the various papers."

Everyone was giving him their undivided attention and it was nerve wracking, but he had no choice but to continue on.

"We, that is, the four of us, have asked everyone here so we can explain a few things. You are here, Sirius, because it allows for privacy and because you're my godfather. We thank you for having us. I would ask all of you to keep what is discussed here to yourselves."

"As if they will have a choice," Ginny muttered, which Harry ignored.

"What could be so important?" Molly asked impatiently.

He looked down and took a deep breath. Gabrielle squeezed his hand slightly, which he appreciated. "Well, I have this special, ah, situation, but we didn't know what it was until Apolline explained it to me. But now that we know what it is, we think it's time to tell you." He glanced at Hermione and saw she looked as nervous as he felt.

"You've been hiding something else from us?" Emma asked,

sounding a little hurt.

Harry winced.

"Mum, you have to understand. We didn't know what exactly it was, just that something unusual was going on. We searched all of the Hogwarts library and couldn't find an answer or even a hint as to one," Hermione said and spread her hands to show her helplessness.

Harry saw that almost everyone was getting ready to demand an answer, so he quickly let go of Gabrielle's hand and pulled out his secret. "Let me go first," he told them. As he stared at his secret, he realized he had forgotten to have someone seal the secret papers - a job for the afternoon.

Clearing his throat, he said, "Because it is extremely important this stays a secret, we've hidden the information under a Fidelius charm."

Sirius was immediately alert. "It's that important?"

Harry nodded and Sirius blew out a breath, now looking slightly worried.

"What is that charm?" Molly Weasley asked.

"The Fidelius charm," Hermione explained, "is a way to hide information, inside a person. We each have a secret and the magic will protect it and keep it hidden as long as the Secret Keeper doesn't give it away. In addition, once you know the secret, you can talk about it with anyone who already knows, but you can't tell anyone else. Only the Secret Keeper can spread the information."

"But what about the rest of our family?" Molly asked.

"We'll tell them later," Ginny replied.

"I'll go first, and then each of the girls will share theirs, then we can talk about what it all means." Harry looked at the girls and they pulled their secrets out of a pocket.

Harry cleared his throat again. "Harry James Potter is bonded to several witches by a special power known as a Rescue Bond. Each bond was created when he saved an unattached witch from dying. Because of the bond, they are his magical wives for the rest of their lives and he will protect them from all others not of our bond."

There were several gasps, Molly's and Emma's being most noticeable. Harry saw Sirius mentally struggling with a thought, and realized the power of the Fidelius. It was obvious that Sirius wanted to say something about Hermione and Ginny, but magic would not let him make that connection.

Hermione went next. "Hermione Jean is magically bonded to Harry James Potter and is his magical wife. They are bound by magic and by love, never to be magically separated. They share magic, knowledge of the other, and will protect each other against all others not of the bond."

"Hermione!" Emma cried as Dan sat there with a shocked but otherwise blank expression. The girl cringed.

To get it over with as soon as possible, Ginny read hers out: "Ginevra is magically bonded to Harry James Potter and is his magical wife. They are bound by magic and by love, never to be magically separated as long as they live. They share magic, knowledge of the other, and will protect each other against all others not of the bond."

"Ginevra Molly Weasley!" Molly roared, while Arthur sat there thoughtfully. Ginny sat looking defiant.

Hermione leaned down to help Gabrielle read her secret, whispering

the English words slowly into her ear to prompt her. Slowly but clearly, Gabrielle read: "I, Gabrielle Laure, am magically bonded to Harry James Potter and I am his magical wife. We share magic, knowledge of the other, and will protect each other against all others not of the bond."

Silence reigned for a moment until Sirius chuckled. "James would be proud of you, Harry, although Lily would be giving you the questioning of your life." Harry gave him a hesitant grin.

"I think I need to ignore Hermione's statement for a moment. What does your statement really mean, Harry?" Emma asked intently and focused on her son.

He did his best to bear her scrutiny. Here goes, he thought. "It means that my magic will reach out to any single girl who is in mortal peril ... and if I save her life it will magically bond her to me ... as a wife." He glanced around the room. His parents were looking at them with confusion. The Weasleys were thinking it through, as was Sirius. The Delacours smiled at him supportively.

His focus returned to Molly, who was looking like she was about to erupt. A glance showed Ginny watching her mother carefully and his bond-mate had her hand on the end of her wand, drawing it very slowly. Ginny had agreed during breakfast to watch her mother closely, and if required, take defensive action.

"What do you mean by..." Emma started before she was interrupted.

Molly finally had enough. "No, I forbid it," she said forcefully.

Ginny sat up a little straighter. "Mum! You can't..."

"Oh yes I can, young lady. You come over here right now," her mother ordered sharply.

"No, I can't, Mum. There is nothing to stop or forbid. I was bonded almost two years ago," Ginny countered.

"Wait!" Sirius shouted, halting the argument. He looked at Harry. "I now understand why you wanted to come here and for me to be here as well." He surveyed the room. "There will be no more shouting and we will discuss this calmly." No one said anything for a moment.

"Hermione?" Emma sounded worried.

Hermione looked down for a second to find her courage before she looked back up and carefully explained. "I was the first. As you know, on Halloween in my first year, a troll came into the school and trapped me in a bathroom. I would have been killed if Harry hadn't saved me. While we didn't know what was happening at the time, Harry and I magically bonded. It's why we've been so close."

"But..."

"I'm sorry, Mum. I'm sorry we hid it from you, but we didn't know what to tell you, let alone how to tell you. Also, it seemed so ... private," Hermione finally said.

"I think everyone knows by now," Ginny quickly said to prevent an argument amongst the Grangers, "that Harry saved me at the end of my first year at school from a possessed diary and a basilisk." She looked lovingly at Harry. "We bonded when I came to and I've been very happy in this."

"When you were stuck in the Chamber of Secrets, you weren't really stuck, were you?" her father asked.

"No, Dad. Part of the bonding process is the need to be close for the first day or so as the bond settles," Ginny said, looking at Harry and then nodding at Gabrielle.

"It's true," Harry admitted. "It's why I'm holding Gabrielle's hand now. Our first day will end soon, but there is still discomfort if we aren't holding hands right now."

When Harry said nothing more, Sirius asked, "What happened to you and Gabrielle?"

"During the second task yesterday, when I went into the lake, I found Gabrielle was awake when she shouldn't have been, because the spell had been miscast on her. Since she was awake while underwater, she was drowning. So I saved her and we bonded."

"This is preposterous!" Dan objected. "Harry, you must undo this. You can't make slaves of these girls."

"No, Dad," Hermione stopped him. "It's not like that at all. We're not slaves: we're normal girls, except that we have our husband already decided for us."

Dan looked at his wife, who looked just as confused.

"No! I will not allow it!" Molly objected loudly and started to stand, pulling her wand out as she did so.

Knowing she had no other option, Ginny cast a spell, with her wand that was already out and hidden in the folds of her robes. Her mother turned bluish and froze, falling back into her seat as her wand clattered to the floor. Only her head moved, and that was very slowly.

Emma gasped.

"Don't worry, Emma, it's a modified Body-Bind. She can still breathe and listen, but she can't yell or do anything to anyone until she's released," Ginny explained as she put her wand away.

Her father looked a little embarrassed for a moment while he looked

at his wife, before he turned a proud look towards his daughter. "You did that silently and three years before being trained for it."

"Thanks, Dad," she said, a little embarrassed at the praise but glad he was not reprimanding her for having to stop her mother from making a fool of herself.

"But..." Emma was looking between Ginny and her mother.

"Don't worry about it," Arthur said. "She'll be fine," he said as if it was not an issue, but he also would not look at any of the other adults. Looking at his daughter instead, he asked her gently, "Ginny, why didn't you come tell me?"

"I'm sorry, Dad. Like Hermione, I didn't know how to explain the bond. I also knew Mum would make a scene of it and I didn't want to have to make you keep it a secret from her. If it helps, we were planning to tell everyone this summer, but, well..." Ginny looked at Harry.

"When Gabrielle bonded with me, her mother noticed. Apolline explained what was going on, which finally let us know the truth. We decided that we needed to tell you sooner than this summer so we could make any needed plans," he told them. "Plus, we were tired of keeping the secret," he said wearily.

Emma shook her head. "We are going to have to have a long talk, young lady." Realizing her mistake, she quickly added, "And you too, young man."

"Mum, there's not much more to talk about," Harry protested. "We're really sorry we didn't tell you sooner, but there's not really anything else to add or do. I've been trying to do little things for Hermione and Ginny so everyone will get used to the idea of me taking care of them, but what else is there to discuss? We can't change this."

"You talk like you'll be taking care of them for the rest of your life,"

Dan said.

"I will be," Harry replied. "Being magically bonded is permanent and to be magically married..."

"Explain that part carefully," Emma ordered.

"That's magically, not legally, meaning we have a magical connection for the moment," Harry said hurriedly, trying to head off more bad reactions. "We'll get legally married when we're of age, like normal. That means waiting about two and a half years for Hermione when I turn seventeen as she's older, three and half years for Ginny, and five and half years for Gabrielle. In the meantime, we'll only act like boyfriend and girlfriends."

Emma groaned and flopped back in her chair.

Hermione sighed, recognizing her mother had just passed her threshold and gone into emotional overload.

Dan looked at Harry for a moment before taking a deep breath and leaning back in his chair with a resigned look, as if not sure what to say.

"Ginny," her father said, as if treading carefully. "I know your mother would want to know, and I suppose I do as well. Exactly what do you mean by 'act like boyfriend and girlfriend'?"

"If I may?" Hermione spoke up and Arthur nodded to her. "We had already decided a few things, like no sex before we're married, but Apolline suggested we think everything through carefully since Gabrielle is so much younger. Therefore, we've decided that 'real' kissing can't begin until the youngest of the couple is at least thirteen and," Hermione blushed slightly, "other in-between activities need to wait as long as possible, preferably until just before marriage."

Arthur paled a little at the detailed information. "I see." He looked at his wife who seemed to be struggling to look at him and convey a glare. "I can tell that Molly would prefer that anything beyond kissing wait until you are married, but I suppose what you have outlined is acceptable to me given that you are already magically married." He looked at the Delacours, who were sitting there very calmly, and then at the Grangers and specifically Dan.

Dan cringed slightly at being put on the spot for such a delicate subject. "I will grudgingly admit that's probably normal for teenagers from what I hear," he said slowly and not very confidently. He looked at Emma, but she was still staring at the ceiling and trying to come to grips with the changes in her family. "In fact, waiting until marriage for sex is better than many normal teenagers from the reports I've read, so I suppose we should be happy for that; but this is all so much to take in." He sighed and looked down, not able to face his children at the moment. "This is far more than I ever wanted to know about my daughter's - and son's - intimate plans."

Arthur nodded his agreement and looked at the Delacours.

"That is acceptable to us too, as Veela view this bonding process differently," Apolline answered. "However, I believe Harry will have a hard time following through in regards to my daughter. Or perhaps I should say that I don't believe she will let him wait that long."

"Why is that?" Arthur asked.

"Fundamentally, Veela mature differently. Harry told me yesterday that he believed Gabrielle to be about nine." Apolline noticed the others were nodding their agreement with that guess. "However, she had her eleventh birthday in November. On the other hand, I believe she has recently started her maturation phase and will quickly change so that she is fully mature by the time she is fifteen."

"Holy Merlin!" Arthur exclaimed. "I didn't know that kind of growth

was possible for anyone."

"It's a protection mechanism," Apolline said. "But because of her maturation, her Veela nature, and the pressure from their bond, I predict Harry will probably have to marry her at sixteen." Her husband looked uncomfortable, but did not contradict his wife.

Hermione and Ginny looked a little upset at that.

"I know, it's not fair to you," the Veela mother said sympathetically to the older girls. "It is something you four will have to work out."

"You have no other children, Dan?" Arthur asked.

"No, just these two," Dan said.

Arthur looked at the French couple. "Jean-Aimé?"

"Just the one other daughter, and she already knows, being Veela herself as well as being present when it was all explained," the man answered.

Arthur looked at Ginny. "When did you plan to tell your brothers?"

"I would prefer at the wedding, but soon would probably be better and this summer at the latest." Ginny's less-than-thrilled answer and resigned expression drew chuckles.

"This answers so much," Emma said, slowly sitting up as she started to come to terms with the change in her family. "About school ... this means you still will go to Beauxbatons next year, won't it?"

"Yes," Hermione answered quickly. "We believe this breaks Dumbledore's promise so we can transfer to Beauxbatons next year. Headmistress Maxime said she would allow it if our French is good enough."

"Wait!" Arthur suddenly exclaimed in alarm. "What are you talking about?" Beside him, Molly was making a few low moans too, as she tried to yell something.

"Because of multiple examples of the school being unsafe for us," Hermione started explaining, "my parents made an agreement with the Headmaster. In order for us to return to Hogwarts next year, the Headmaster had to ensure that we didn't run into any deadly situations other than what was required by the Triwizard Tournament, Harry didn't have to save anyone's life, and we finished school in the same condition we started it. The first may not have been violated yet, but the last two have. Harry saved Gabrielle's life, and by doing so, he bonded her to him. It seems to me that being magically married to someone is big enough to break the agreement. Therefore, we are free to leave Hogwarts and attend another school, one that we all hope will be safer." She ignored the prophecy for the moment and hoped that particular problem solved itself soon.

"I see," Arthur said slowly.

"Also, Mr Delacour made a suggestion to make our schooling safer for the rest of this year that we plan to follow." Hermione noticed that all the adults were looking at her very curiously. She nodded to the man.

"Yes, once I knew of Harry's entry into the Tournament," a sly grin appeared, "it occurred to me that he should attend the school written on his entry form..."

"But there was no school name on his entry," Sirius pointed out, leaning forward as he listened carefully.

"Exactly," Jean-Aimé said with a triumphant smile. "His only requirement is that he participate in the Tournament. In the meantime, he and his bond-mates can leave Hogwarts and pursue independent

study in a safe location, returning only for the third task. In order to help their French, I would suggest they come stay at our house where we will have tutors attend regularly to help them with their school work."

Sirius stared at the man for a moment before he broke out in laughter. "Brilliant solution! I should have thought of withdrawing him and hiring tutors. I can't believe I missed that." He looked at Emma and Dan who had thoughtful smiles.

Dan nodded at the Frenchman. "I can appreciate that solution. So you would use your home like a boarding school?"

Jean-Aimé returned the nod. "You may think of it that way. In addition to your children staying and being educated there, I will get a permanent Portkey for you between your home and mine so that you may come visit when you desire. You'd be welcome any weekend and even for an extended stay in the summer, if they stay with us and do not travel to your home," he said graciously.

Emma looked at Dan. "We've never been able to visit Hogwarts, so it would be a real plus, beyond their safety from Dumbledore and Hogwarts."

Dan smiled at his wife, understanding her answer, and turned back to Jean-Aimé. "We'll accept and happily help pay for the tutors. Hogwarts should owe us a refund for the rest of the term."

Jean-Aimé looked pleased. "Very good." He turned to Arthur. "I will make you the same offer to visit as the parents of Ginny."

Arthur sat there for a moment. "I can see the appeal for Harry and Hermione. Ginny?"

"Of course I want to go. I'll be with Harry for the rest of my life and that includes whatever school he goes to. Besides, he and Hermione

are my best friends at school ... well, apart from them I only have two other real friends."

"But your brothers are there," her father asked with a wave of his hands.

"They are there, Dad, but we all sort of ignore each other except for when we need to do something together, like when I play on the Quidditch team and Fred and George are doing that, too. In fact, I now get along better with Fred and George than I do Ron," she explained.

Arthur looked resigned and not entirely happy, but he did not argue. He looked at Harry for a moment before he reached over and picked up his wife's wand off the floor and put it in a side pocket of his robes. Then with his wand, he ended the binding spell on his wife. "Molly, what do you think about Ginny changing schools?"

"Ginny will not be changing schools!" Molly shouted as she slowly sat up on the settee. "She will not be going with them! She will be coming home with us immediately! She will..." A blue aura briefly engulfed the woman cutting her tirade cut off and freezing her in her seat.

Arthur put the wand in his hand away and turned back to everyone else. "My apologies, I had hoped she had cooled off by now, but apparently this latest information was too much for her." He ran a hand through his thinning hair as he thought for another moment. "As it seems we are the only family not wanting our child to change schools, although it's mostly because we're used to sending our children to Hogwarts..." He paused for a moment. "But then Ginny needs to..." He broke off his thoughts again.

He worked his mouth for a moment, but could not get any words to come out. Finally, in an almost strangled voice Arthur said, "Mr Potter, I think the best thing would be..." He paused yet again before his

voice dropped to a ragged whisper as he looked down, "...would be for you to, uh, to call in your debt..."

Harry closed his eyes for a moment. He had been afraid it might come to this. He felt a hand on his right shoulder and Ginny's whisper in his ear. "It will be all right, Harry." He nodded and opened his eyes again. Her father still looked like he wished there was another way and he understood a bit of the scope of the problem the poor man was dealing with. The Delacours, however, clearly waited for an explanation. A quick glance at Sirius showed his godfather to be giving him a supporting smile, fully aware of what was being requested. His parents were giving him a look of sudden understanding.

"Mr Weasley, while that would solve the problem, are you really sure you want me to?" Harry really did not want to hurt the man. "I don't want to cause any more problems than I have to..."

Arthur nodded. "Thank you for understanding, but I think it would be for the best," he sadly said as he looked up, his eyes shiny from unshed tears. "Ginny, I knew I would be giving you away one day, but this is not the way I had imagined it. I'm sorry I haven't provided for you, that..." He broke off, unable to continue and tears started to run down his face.

Ginny practically ran over to him and enveloped him in a hug. "Dad, you've done your best and it's always been good enough. This isn't your fault." Her father patted her back as he returned the hug. "I love you so much." They held each other for a long moment.

With effort, Arthur released his daughter and stood as tall and as proudly as he could. "Mr Potter, if you would?"

"Since you insist." Harry stood as well, letting go of Gabrielle.

"Harry?" Dan said a little loudly, standing too and looking back and

forth between his son and Arthur.

"He is completing an agreement we have. It must be this way," Arthur answered stoically, as if that explained everything. He stood a little straighter, pulling up his dignity.

"You're really going to go through with it?" Dan asked his son.

Harry looked at his parents and at the Delacours, all of whom were looking at him expectantly, although Jean-Aimé now had a look as if he understood what was about to be said. "It is a Wizarding tradition that when the head of a family, and I am the head of the Potters, risks his life to save someone, that a Life Debt is created. In that way, and to be very specific, all three families owe me a Life Debt. However, I've only approached Mr Weasley about it because of the need to protect Ginny." He looked at Ginny and smiled lovingly.

"To protect me from my mother's manipulations and control," Ginny said quietly, causing her father to wince at the exposed family secret.

Harry mostly addressed the Delacours, but he also explained to remind his parents and godfather. "I approached Mr Weasley a year and a half ago and informed him that I knew about the Life Debt and that I would allow it to be postponed indefinitely as long as Ginny was treated well and could spend time with us. I, uh, I understand that he doesn't really want this to happen just as I don't, but it would solve all of Ginny's problems. She will become a part of my family and I would become her guardian. Where she goes to school and everything thing else about her life will become my responsibility. She will become a Potter a little sooner than she would have otherwise and I will be taking care of her sooner than otherwise." He looked at the Delacours.

Jean-Aimé nodded and rose. "I can be your witness if you need me to be."

Harry smiled a little grimly. "You and your wife have been very accepting and supporting of all of us, and we thank you."

"Apolline and I recognize you as our son-in-law and we will support you in these transitions where you desire." He turned to Harry's father with a look of friendship, which Dan returned.

"Thank you," Harry said and bowed at the neck.

"Mr Potter, if you will?" Arthur asked before he leaned down slightly and whispered into Ginny's ear as she stood in front of him. Ginny nodded and smiled, looking demurely at Harry.

While he wished it had not come to this, Harry nodded and stepped forward. Taking a deep breath and recalling what he had read about this tradition, he said. "Mr Arthur Weasley and head of the Weasley Family, I, Harry James Potter and head of the Potter family, call in the Life Debt your family owes to mine for risking the head of this family for one of yours."

"Name your price, Mr Potter," Arthur replied, as tradition demanded. His eyes became very shiny again.

"I demand the life I saved."

Arthur turned Ginny to him and gave her a hug, which she returned. He whispered to her before turning her to Harry and holding her by the shoulders at arm's length. Ginny smiled at Harry before she knelt down on both knees. "I present to you, Ginevra Molly Weasley, to become a part of your house in full payment of the Life Debt. Please take care of her and love her as your own," he said, his voice breaking at the end and with a tear slowly streaking down his face. "As we have," he added in a gravelly whisper.

"The Debt is paid in full. She shall be as our own," Harry said with much emotion as he bent down to grab Ginny's shoulders. "Rise

Ginevra Potter." When she was standing with a large happy grin, he pulled her into a hug. He was not sure who was holding on more tightly.

Ginny stretched up slightly and whispered in his ear before stepping to the side.

Harry grinned at her and then turned to her father. "While I may be responsible for her now, Ginny wants to know if you would still give her away at her wedding."

"I would. Thank you, Harry." Arthur could not help but feel elated that his tie to his daughter was not fully cut. Her beaming look helped cement his feeling.

Ginny kissed Harry on the cheek and then gave her father another hug before stepping back to Harry's side.

"I must be going soft, but that gets me right here," Sirius said as he lightly pounded his fist over his heart. Everyone chuckled lightly as the moment lightened slightly, except for Molly who was still frozen on the settee.

"This is all so difficult to believe," Dan said while shaking his head.

Sirius snorted. "We can lay all of this at Dumbledore's feet," he said, shaking his head. He still had not totally forgiven the old man for leaving him in Azkaban.

"What do you mean?" Arthur asked.

Knowing that the man held Dumbledore in high regard, Sirius spelled it all out. "It is Dumbledore's job to keep the school safe, including keeping trolls out," he said as he indicated Hermione. "It is also his job to keep Dark artefacts out of the school, not to mention defeating magical monsters." This time he indicated Ginny. "Hell, he was at the

school the last time the Chamber of Secrets was opened, so he should have known where it was and sealed off that part of the castle. It was Dumbledore's fault there was a Death Eater at the school, living there as an Animagus last year. Now we have this Tournament Harry should not have been a part of, except that Dumbledore's safety precautions failed, and Gabrielle should not have woken early, except that Dumbledore miscast the spell on her."

"It's terrible how many horrible things have happened to Harry and Hermione there. We've wanted them to change schools since the end of their second year," Emma said, finally rejoining the conversation again.

"And now you'll get your wish," Harry told her before looking at Arthur. "I really am sorry, Mr Weasley."

He nodded. "I believe I understand now. This has opened my eyes in a new way. And why don't you call us Arthur and..." He looked at his wife for a second. "Call me Arthur. Molly will probably need to stay Mrs Weasley until she completely accepts this."

Harry buried his face in Ginny's hair as he thought very sincerely about how grateful he was that none of his mates were like Mrs Weasley. He also considered that magic probably would not take personality into account, so if he saved someone like Pansy Parkinson, he would be stuck with her - eww.

"It seems like we have this problem explained and solved," Sirius said jovially. "How about we adjourn to the dining room for some lunch? Afterward, I can go to the Ministry to get the proper form and we can make it all legal." He rose and led them all through the house.

Arthur stayed behind to release his wife and to have a quick discussion with her in private. When they joined the others, Molly was still fuming, but she did not say anything - literally.

Food was ready and waiting for them due to a house-elf Sirius had purchased, since the old one his mother had owned had died. Gabrielle was holding Harry's hand again, making both of them a little happier and more relaxed. The lunch discussion was more carefree, centring on what living was like for each family. By the end, it was agreed that they all would come to France for at least part of the summer as a holiday, except for the Weasleys as Arthur declined.

Sirius went to the Ministry and returned with a form. "Let me quickly fill this in."

Harry and Ginny watched him. When he was at the spot where he was about to fill in Ginny's new name, she stopped him.

"Harry, since my name is changing anyway, do you mind if I change my middle name?"

He shrugged. "If that's what you want. What would you pick?"

She looked at him nervously, then turned to the Grangers. "Emma, do you mind if I use your name for my new middle name?"

Emma rushed over to envelop the little redhead in a hug, beaming. "Not at all, Ginny."

When Ginny turned back to Harry and Sirius, she saw that her father was trying to give her a supporting look; however, most of his attention was on having to keep hold of his wife's arm. Fortunately, she was still magically silenced.

"That would be 'Ginevra Emma Potter'?" Sirius asked.

"Please," Ginny said happily.

Sirius finished with the form and then signed it as witness. He offered it to Arthur and Harry for each to sign. At the end, he made two

copies, one for each family. Looking at the official copy for a moment, he finally handed it to Harry as well. "It's your call, Harry, but instead of taking this to the Ministry on Monday, you do have another option and I think you should consider it."

"What?"

Sirius glanced at Arthur before he said, "You could hold onto that and not turn it in unless you really have to. Because this is not done often, and more importantly, because your name is on it, this will be on the front page of the Daily Prophet the next day. That will cause some questions to be asked you probably won't want to answer, nor will Arthur..." He raised an eyebrow as he looked questioningly at his godson.

Harry looked at Arthur and saw a small look of hope. He suddenly realized this "claiming" had even bigger ramifications than he had understood at first. This could potentially wreck Arthur's reputation, even if he was not at fault. "Thank you, Sirius, that's very interesting. So I really don't have to turn it in straight away?"

"No, it really becomes important only if you need to prove Ginny is part of your house. In fact, you can keep it and only show it to those who need to see it, such as the Headmistress of Beauxbatons when you register Ginny there," he explained.

He looked to Arthur. "Would it be all right with you if I didn't turn this form in any time soon?"

Arthur smiled gratefully. "I would appreciate it. Thank you, Harry." He reached out and shook Harry's hand.

"Are there any more secrets?" Dan asked his son and daughter.

"No, you really do know them all," Hermione said. "I'm sorry we kept it from you, but we didn't know what or how to tell you and didn't think

you'd like being told about something so vague."

"What she means is that we thought you'd pull us out of the Magical world," Harry said.

"There are days I wished both of you were not magical," Emma said in honesty. "I haven't decided whether this is one of those days or not." She fixed her daughter with a stare. "There will be a wedding for you, right?"

"Of course, Mum. All three of us will want a wedding," Hermione said with a bright smile, echoed by the other two girls.

"Tough luck, Harry," Sirius said in a jolly manner as he clapped the boy on the back.

Harry only grinned, deciding that was the safest thing to do at the moment.

Arthur looked at his daughter. "Ginny, you can wait a short while before telling your three older brothers, but when do you plan to tell the three that go to Hogwarts? They're going to wonder why you're leaving school."

Ginny sighed and looked at Harry, who shrugged. "I suppose I can tell them when we return and before we leave. That probably would be easiest on them."

"Thank you. I think we should go and let you plan the rest of your day." Arthur held open his arms and Ginny came over and gave him a hug. "Take care of yourself and the rest of them," he whispered to her. "And don't forget to write occasionally."

She nodded against his shoulder. "I will." When she let him go, she looked at her mother, wondering what to do.

The disapproving look Molly had been wearing for most of the day softened and turned sad. She held her arms open too.

With a little fear, Ginny tentatively walked over and gave her mother a hug as well. To her surprise, her mother gave her a comforting hug. "I'm sorry, Ginny," she whispered. "That you want to leave makes me wonder if I've failed you as a mother. I really do love you."

Not sure what to say, Ginny only whispered, "I'm sorry, but I do think this is for the best - for both of us ... and I love you most of the time." She felt her mother stiffen a little before she let go and left the room. Ginny felt sad for saying that, but did not feel this was the time to lie.

Arthur kissed her on the forehead. "I'll let you know when I can get Bill and Charlie home, as well as bring Percy." He said good-bye to everyone and followed his wife out.

Harry looked at Ginny, who was now struggling to maintain her composure as she watched her father and mother walk away. He pulled her to his side and held her in a one-armed hug. Ginny put her arms around his waist and held on tightly, burying her face in his shoulder. Everyone gave her a moment and Gabrielle even moved over and softly patted her on the back.

"I believe Arthur is correct, we do need to plan a few things," Sirius said softly, as if afraid to intrude on Ginny's feelings.

"We do," Hermione agreed as she pulled out her little notebook and pen. "Why don't we sit down and discuss this." An hour later, everyone was satisfied with the plan for the next few days and what would generally happen through the end of June.

Harry, his mates, and the Delacours returned to school, while the Grangers remained at Sirius's house. The first part of the day had gone a lot better than he had thought it would. He even decided that as long as he kept everything on the 'friend' level, he had to admit

that he liked spending time with Gabi.

Chapter 22 - Moving

Harry and his bond-mates walked from the Three Broomsticks to Hogwarts together with the Delacours. Harry's mind was spinning with what needed to be done and he hoped it would all work out. However, it felt like there were many parts that could go wrong, and most of them revolved around Albus Dumbledore.

Harry had decided that he really did not hate the Headmaster, but he wanted to do as little as possible with the man. Dumbledore had made too many mistakes with Harry and their cost had been higher than Harry cared to pay. Also, he was not sure about the man's motives. What was driving his strange actions?

As they walked past the end of the lake, Apolline Delacour cleared her throat. "It is time to let go," she said to her daughter. Gabrielle looked unhappy, but she complied. Apolline looked at Harry and raised her eyebrows.

"Yes," he answered the implied question, "our need to touch is over and has been for an hour or so." Gabrielle gave him a brief look of betrayal but did not say anything.

Jean-Aimé looked resigned, but a lot more accepting than he had been yesterday. "You only need to call us if you have trouble," said Apolline, looking pleased.

"We will," he assured her. "I guess we'll see you in about two hours. If you don't hear from Sirius by then, I suppose you'll need to come find us." The bond-mates left the Delacour parents and continued to the castle. Gabrielle instantly grabbed Harry's hand again after her mother had left. Harry chuckled but did not let go, which pleased the little Veela.

"Perhaps we should search the greenhouses first, while we're out here," Hermione suggested, reminding Harry of their first task.

"That's reasonable," he agreed. Unfortunately, the greenhouses did not have who they were looking for, so they continued together until they reached the Entrance Hall, where Ginny split off for Ravenclaw Tower while Hermione took Gabrielle with her to the library. Harry headed to Gryffindor Tower.

In his dorm room, Harry threw his shrunken overnight bag into his trunk, and with several waves of his wand floated all of his belongings on top of it. As he finished, Neville came out of the bathroom.

"Ah, Neville, just the person I was looking for..."

Neville stopped and looked at Harry suspiciously. "Why?" he asked after a moment's pause.

"We need to talk because you need to know some things that are happening." At Neville's blank stare, Harry continued. "Look, you're probably my best friend here and you deserve to know."

"What about Ron?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm not sure what Ron is. We're sort of friends, same as I am with Dean and Seamus. Even though I know Ron better than them, I would say that Ron hasn't been my best friend for some time. But you ... well, I know we haven't spent a huge amount of time together in past years, but I feel like we've become a lot better friends this year. I tend to think of you as my best male friend at this point."

Neville slowly nodded. "I suppose we have, although I haven't really thought about it. I guess I've enjoyed the time we do things together without considering it."

"I still want to talk to you about something, if you'll join me? Ginny

has gone to get Luna, who's her best friend, and we'll all talk together in a secure place. Uh, do you know where Ron is? I do need to talk to him later, even though I don't really want to very much." Harry was quite concerned about what Ron's reaction to the news would be.

"I think he mentioned something about flying. You know he really wants to be Keeper," Neville pointed out.

Harry winced at the mention of the Quidditch team and was glad his back was towards Neville so as not to give away his feelings. They were going to be ruining so many plans. Angelina was going to be really, really upset with him and Ginny, as they would miss the last Gryffindor game of the year. Crap! he thought, that game against Krum probably won't happen now either.

As he came down the stairs, Harry slowed down a little to search the common room. There, over to the side, was the other set of people he needed to find. "I need just a moment to deliver a message, Neville."

"Sure, no problem, Harry. I'll wait for you by the portrait."

Harry walked up to the Weasley twins, who were quietly talking with Lee Jordan. They were planning a prank of some kind he was sure. "Hey, Lee, Fred, George."

"Harry," Lee returned, while the twins gave him two identical calculating grins in greeting.

"Fred, George, can you do me a big favour and find Ron and then bring him to my training room in about half an hour? Neville said he mentioned flying, probably to practice at Keeper for tryouts." Harry watched them immediately look at each other for a moment.

"I suppose..."

"If it's important enough."

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't, and this is a family matter," Harry assured them. "I could also say that if you don't, Ginny will be coming after you and will be happy to drag you there personally ... wand in hand."

A small shudder went through each twin, and even Lee looked uncomfortable at hearing that, making Harry wonder what stories Lee had heard.

"That locked room you took us to once?" the one Harry had labelled 'Fred' asked.

"Yeah, that one. Half an hour from now, and we should be done before dinner."

"Right, we'll be there with Ron," 'George' agreed.

"Thanks!" he said brightly and left them to it. Harry joined Neville and led his friend out of the Tower.

"Where are we going?" Neville asked.

"We're going to the training room that McGonagall gave me to use during the Tournament. You once said you'd like to see it," Harry told him with a grin.

When they arrived at the room, Hermione was standing in the open doorway. "Ginny and Luna are already here," she said in response to Harry's questioning look.

"Good. I'm already packed, too," he told her.

She nodded in acknowledgement and closed the door after the two boys. She also put a privacy charm over the door.

Neville looked around. "I expected more for some reason."

Harry chuckled and his two older bond-mates smiled in their amusement. "Sorry, mate. It's just a room to practice spells where no one else will get hurt if something goes wrong. Take a seat." He waved his friend to a chair and took the middle seat of the couch between Gabrielle and Ginny. He noticed that Luna was looking at them a little more attentively than normal.

"So," Harry drawled and looked at his bond-mates.

"I think you should explain what we're about to do, then the rest of us can share our parts," Hermione suggested.

"Right, good idea as usual." Harry took a deep breath. "Well, we don't have many truly good friends here, but you are the two we consider our closest friends, so we thought we'd tell you our news. We think you deserve to know."

"You know you can't really run away from Nargles, don't you, Harry?" Luna suddenly asked.

After a brief pause, Harry replied, "I don't think I've ever given that any thought, Luna, but thanks for the warning."

"Any time," the Ravenclaw said airily.

"We, err, well, we're about to leave Hogwarts permanently - all of us," Harry blurted out.

"What?" Neville shouted, not embarrassed at all by his outburst. He was not sure he had ever heard of anyone voluntarily leaving Hogwarts.

"My parents ... well, my and Hermione's parents ... have been trying to get us away from Hogwarts since the end of our second year

because of all the danger, after what happened to both Hermione and me," Harry explained. "We've not been ready to leave before now. But, well, something else has happened and we have a real offer that allows us to leave and our parents are insisting on it. And to be honest, like I said, we think of you two as our only real friends and that's not enough for our parents to let us stay when they think we could be killed at Hogwarts."

Neville opened his mouth to reply and then shut it; Harry wondered what his friend had been about to say.

"You four have a secret, and it is that secret that is making you leave," Luna said, stating it as fact, not a question.

"How did you know?" Ginny asked a little fearfully.

Luna looked at each of the bond-mates. "I watch things. It seems like I should know, but I can't say for some reason. It must be the Limprechauns."

"You mean Leprechauns?" Hermione supplied helpfully.

"No, the Limprechauns. They're a distant cousin of the Leprechauns, but they like to hoard information. I believe the Ministry stole the knowledge of how to do Obliviation from them."

Ginny shrugged and did her best not to smirk or otherwise make fun of her best non-bonded friend at school. "I don't know if that's the answer, Luna, but we've hidden the knowledge of our secret under a Fidelius charm. When we tell you our secret, you'll know, but you won't be able to tell anyone."

"Are you serious? You can do that?" Neville asked.

"Yes," Hermione replied. "That's how the magic works. You will be able to talk about it with Luna or with us, as long as no one else can

hear you. The magic protects the secret. Only the Secret Keeper can give the knowledge away."

"That sounds useful. Hmm," Luna took on a more dreamily look than normal for a brief second, "maybe the knowledge of where Snorkacks really live has been put under a Fidelius charm. I'll have to ask Daddy next time I see him."

"Hermione, I think you should go first," Ginny quickly said, so they did not start talking about Luna's special creatures. The latter returned to her previous state of alertness.

"All right." Hermione pulled out her secret note after a sceptical glance at Ginny.

"We need to hide those tonight," Harry quietly said to Hermione.

She nodded in agreement. In a serious voice, she read out her secret about being magically bonded to Harry.

Luna's expression did not change, but Neville's turned to surprise. His surprise increased when Ginny read her secret, and Gabrielle read hers, with Hermione whispering the English in her ear again.

Neville looked from Harry to each of the girls, a stunned expression frozen on his face.

Luna had no such problem. She looked directly at Ginny. "Are you happy?"

A big grin broke out slowly across Ginny's face. "Very."

Neville's response was simpler than Luna's. "How?"

Harry shook his head slightly. "I'm sorry, Neville, but I can't answer that. All I can say right now is that it was a surprise in each case, but

we're learning to deal with it and we're happy so far."

"That's ... that's..." Words failed Harry's friend.

"Yeah, it's pretty overwhelming. We just told our parents this morning, and they were..." Harry looked at Hermione.

"Shocked," she answered succinctly.

Ginny snorted. "That might work for yours, and maybe my father. My mother was livid."

Neville shook his head. "If that happened to me, I think my Gran would have a heart attack." He looked at Luna.

"I don't think my Daddy would mind, but I'm not sure I'd want to be a part. I mean, you'd have to schedule everything with Harry. Privacy and spontaneity would be as hard to find as a Crumpled-Horn Snorkack, not to mention that competition could wear Harry out trying to keep up with you," Luna commented, looking at each of the girls. Hermione and Ginny both blushed, while the two boys and Gabrielle looked confused.

"Yes, well, we're still coming to grips with it ourselves since Gabrielle only joined us yesterday," Hermione said quickly, trying to take the conversation a different way. "We'll be leaving school this evening and won't be back until the third task. In fact, we'll only return to school for the third task."

Luna looked a little confused, but Neville nodded in understanding and looked at Harry. "Your life hasn't been easy here, has it? And this year, you got thrown into the Tournament."

"And they still haven't found out why," Harry said, answering the implied question.

"I'll be sorry to see you go," Neville told him sincerely. "I've felt like we've been becoming much better friends this year." He quickly added, "You too, Hermione and Ginny."

"Thanks, Neville. We can still write and I will come back to England from time to time. I'd like to invite you to visit during the summer, too," Harry promised.

"I'd like that," Neville said with a grateful look.

"I'll write you too, Luna, and maybe you can visit too," Ginny quickly said.

Luna got up and hugged Ginny. That prompted a round of hugs between the friends. Not to be left out Gabrielle hugged Luna and Neville, causing the boy to blush greatly. They all talked about keeping in touch until a knock interrupted them.

Harry looked at Hermione.

"I made it so we could hear sounds from the outside, but they couldn't hear us," she explained as she walked to the door and opened it.

The three Weasley boys were standing there. The twins looked curious while Ron looked uncomfortable and could not stand still, shuffling from foot to foot.

Neville saw the new arrivals and immediately turned to Luna. "I think our time is up. Can I walk you back to your Tower?"

Luna cocked her head to the left and smiled. "I think that would be lovely." She grabbed onto Neville's arm and started walking him out of the room, ignoring his blushes. The twins moved aside and each gave the couple an amused grin before looking to the other.

"That has potential..." one twin said.

"But should we encourage or discourage it?"

"You should leave them alone, brothers!" Ginny said.

"Neutral could work..."

"But it's so boring..."

"Yet so much safer," Ginny said intensely.

"Why don't you come in?" Harry gestured with a wave, trying to get things back on track. They did have a schedule after all.

Hermione closed the door behind the brothers while Harry floated another chair from the side of the room over for Ron. The bond-mates took the couch again after Hermione recast the privacy spells.

"Why are we here?" Ron asked, as he looked around. He turned back to the others and pointed at Gabrielle. "Why is she still here?"

Harry looked at Ginny.

Her mouth turned down into a frown, but she took a deep breath and started anyway. "We have some news for you, some family news."

Ron's brow furrowed. "Then why are they here? No offense, Harry."

Harry understood, but still had to suppress irritation at Hermione being overlooked.

"Because they're a part of it," Ginny said a little sarcastically because of the obviousness of the answer. "Listen and please don't interrupt, it will go a lot faster this way. There are three things you need to

know.

"First of all, some time back, and I'm not going to say when - so don't ask - something unusual happened that you need to know about. It's unusual enough that we've hidden the secret with magic because we don't want everyone to know. When we tell you the secret, you'll know what's happened, but magic won't let you tell it to anyone else. Do you understand?"

"There's magic like that?" George asked.

Fred grinned, "Can you imagine what we could do with that?"

"Hem, hem!" Ginny cleared her throat loudly, which shut the twins up. She looked at Ron. "Do you understand too?" she asked normally.

"So, you're going to tell me something, and I won't forget it, but I can't tell anyone else?"

"Right." Ginny confirmed with a nod. "Though I suppose you could forget it if you don't think it's important enough to remember, just like History of Magic."

"I can't ever talk to anyone else about it?"

"You can," Hermione answered, "but only to those who already know, such as your brothers and your parents."

"Except that Bill, Charlie, and Percy probably won't know until summer," Ginny added.

"OK," Ron said uncertainly, which was how he looked.

With a deep breath, Ginny told the secret of her bond. Her three brothers just blinked at her for a moment. In a way, she was happy to have stunned them into silence, as it allowed her to say, "Hermione?"

without having to shout at them to be quiet.

Hermione told her secret and then coaxed Gabrielle through her secret as well.

Ron was looking puzzled while the twins were looking at the four bond-mates with incredulous looks.

Hermione stood and held out her hand. "Come Gabrielle, our part is done for the moment. We'll get ready for the next part and meet you in the Common Room," she told Harry and Ginny before walking out with their newest bond-mate.

Harry put the privacy spells back up. He knew what Hermione had to go and do, having agreed to the plan, but he wished she had stayed to help keep things from exploding.

"Well?" Ginny asked. "Do you have questions or can I move to the next piece of information?"

The twins started to laugh. "Good one, Ginny."

"I'm impressed you got Hermione to go along with it."

With a look to match her comment, Ginny said, "I'm totally serious. I am magically bonded to Harry and everything else I said."

"Right, pull the other one," George said with a laugh.

"I could give you a magical oath since I don't know the Bond Revealing charm," Ginny said, still serious.

Fred paled, as did George. "Please don't joke about that."

"Yeah, it was bad enough Harry did that earlier in the year."

"Then understand that I really mean it. It's also the reason I spend so much time with them, including over the summers," she explained.

"It's hard to argue with that," Ron agreed, surprising his brothers. "Well, it is! She's always with them."

Fred and George stopped their comments and looked thoughtfully at each other.

"To help you understand this is real, I also need to tell you that today is my last day at Hogwarts..."

"What?" Ron yelled. "You can't do that! Dad and Mum would never let you leave school."

"And that takes me to my last bit of news, as of today..." she looked at Harry for strength. He gave her a caring smile and grabbed her hand. She gave him a grateful smile back. "I can change schools because as of today, Dad and Mum have no say over where I go to school."

"But ... wait, that makes no sense." Ron looked at her with even more confusion.

George suddenly sat up very straight and looked at Harry. "You didn't?" Fred's posture changed too as he came to the same conclusion.

Harry sighed. "We really are bonded, so she must go with me as I change schools. Your parents, well, your mother really, didn't want to allow that so your father agreed this way was for the best."

"What?" Ron said urgently, looking between all the others, trying to figure it out.

George looked at Fred. "He has a point."

"Definitely, I wouldn't have wanted to have been there and told them any of that."

"Damn it! Will one of you please tell me what going on!" Ron yelled.

Ginny sighed and wet her lips for an extra moment of silence, knowing there would be no peace for the next few minutes. "Ron, because Harry saved my life from the diary and the basilisk..."

Fear flashed over Ron's face as the memory of that day returned.

"...and because he is head of the Potter family, that created a Life Debt between our families. Harry didn't call it in as long as I was allowed to be around him. But when he and Hermione, and Gabrielle too, leave this school to go somewhere else, I need to go, too. So when Mum didn't want to let me go, Dad said it was best if Harry called in the Life Debt. That made me a part of Harry's family and ... and my name is now Ginevra Emma Potter."

Ron looked between her and Harry, struggling to understand. "But, but..." He trailed off as words escaped him.

"And you're happy?"

"And you want this?"

She smiled at the twins as she knew they would understand. "I'm very happy to be with Harry, as well as Hermione and Gabrielle. I wished I didn't have to make Dad so unhappy, as I could tell it hurt him, but I could also tell he understood and wanted me to be happy."

Fred and George moved over and pulled Ginny into a three-way hug. When they let go, grins sprouted and they hugged Harry. "Brother!" they shouted before one started to tickle him and the other rubbed his head with his knuckles.

Harry howled in laughter and wiggled his way out of the hug. Ginny was giving them all a goofy grin, happy at the twins' acceptance.

"No, I don't believe it," Ron said emphatically. "Dad wouldn't do that." He looked furtively between the others, lingering a bit longer on the twins. "You're having on me, aren't you?" The other four sighed.

"What happened, George? Was he dropped on his head when he was born?"

"Maybe Bill or Charlie did something. We didn't do our first prank on him until he was five, and he was already this way by then."

"Hey!" Ron objected.

"Yeah, be fair to him," Harry said. Ron gave him an appreciative look.

"He doesn't understand the family's dirty secret," Ginny reminded them.

"What dirty secret?" Ron asked, causing the twins to shake their heads at each other.

"I'll leave you two to explain it to him, but do you have any more questions for me or Harry?" Ginny asked them.

"So, are you going to Beauxbatons?" George asked.

"That's to be decided," Harry answered vaguely, so no one could get the information from them. "For the rest of this term, we're going to be tutored; but don't worry, we'll be back. I have to return for the third task of the Tournament, and we'll visit during the summer too."

"And I'll write," Ginny promised.

"Ginny? Are you really a Potter now? Like ... are you married?" Ron asked hesitantly.

She gave him a smile, as she thought this was his way of showing he cared about her. "Yes, I'm really Ginny Potter. No, I'm not legally married, that won't happen until I turn seventeen." When he gave a dirty look to Harry, she hurriedly said, "Ron, please don't blame Harry. He didn't purposefully do this. It was an accident. I'm glad it happened, but it really was an accident."

"I just don't understand why..." Ron still sounded lost.

"Ginny, we can tell that you need to go, so go ahead..."

"Yeah, we'll explain it to him."

"Thank you!" Ginny got up and gave each of her brothers a hug. "Talk to Dad, maybe he can explain it better, or at least from his point of view."

The twins each pulled Harry in for a hug, and he gave Ron a brief hug while the latter just stood there still looking like he was trying to understand what was going on.

"I'll write soon!" Ginny called as she and Harry headed for the door.

"That went better than I thought it would," Harry said as they hurried down the corridor.

"I was never worried about the twins, but Ron surprised me. He may be starting to grow up, but I think the more important reason was because he didn't really understand what was going on. Hopefully, we'll have left before he does and explodes," she said with a teasing grin.

As they reached the bottom of the last set of stairs to the Gryffindor

Tower, they saw Hermione and Gabrielle.

Hermione looked at her watch as they started walking hurriedly. "We're cutting it close. Dinner will be starting soon." She handed one fist-sized trunk to Ginny and another to Harry. "Dean gave me a strange look when I took your trunk, but he didn't stop me."

"I can imagine," Harry said with a grin as they approached McGonagall's door, which Harry immediately knocked on, not giving anyone time to catch their breath after the fast walk.

When the door opened, McGonagall gave them all a look of surprise. "May I help you?"

"Yes, Professor. We need to speak to you as our Head of House, and perhaps as Deputy Headmistress," Harry said solemnly.

She raised an eyebrow but stepped back to allow them to pass. "Please come in then." They walked in and crowded together on her couch for visitors. Taking her own seat, McGonagall asked, "Now, what seems to be the problem?" She scrutinized the little Veela, giving her a look that said she should not be there.

"Professor," Harry took the lead, "our parents are requesting that we leave Hogwarts; therefore, we need the forms for them to sign and the latest copy of our school records."

The professor blinked once in silence before she responded, her Scottish brogue unusually thick. "Mr Potter, you can't leave now. We're in the middle of term ... and you have the Triwizard Tournament."

"I'll return for the third task of the Tournament, but we are withdrawing now anyway. My parents have arranged for tutors," he replied calmly, deliberately using "my parents" to be vague.

She sat there flabbergasted for a moment. "But your parents' agreement with the Headmaster states that you are to remain here."

"Unless Harry has to save someone else's life," Hermione said, as if completing the Professor's sentence. "Harry had to rescue Gabrielle from a life-and-death situation yesterday," she indicated toward the young girl with a tilt of her head, "thereby nullifying the agreement."

"But that was the point of the second task," McGonagall countered.

"I'm sorry to disagree, Professor, but the point of the task was to retrieve a specific someone. For Harry, that was Ron, but while doing so, he found Gabrielle was drowning and if he had not rescued her, she would have died."

"Harry ... saved ... me," the little girl said to back up Hermione's statement.

McGonagall wilted slightly, understanding exactly what Hermione was referring to. "Very well, I shall have to get the Headmaster's approval on this and it is time for dinner. We can continue this conversation in his office after that."

"Professor," Harry said, "if someone like Colin Creevey came to you and asked to be withdrawn from school, would you have to go to the Headmaster?"

She sighed. "No, Mr Potter, I wouldn't; but Mr Creevey is not in the Triwizard Tournament. I can understand why you might not want to talk to the Headmaster, but he is the Headmaster of the school and your leaving does directly affect the school."

"Perhaps we can get the forms and get them signed first? I know my parents would appreciate that since you do not allow them to come here," Hermione said.

"Since there is no direct way to reach them..."

"Actually, they're at Sirius Black's house at the moment, waiting for us, so you can use your Floo connection," Hermione responded neatly.

McGonagall frowned but it was obvious she understood what was happening. She looked at each of them for a moment. "I almost hate to ask this, but if I do not?"

"We'll simply walk out the front door and use the school records we have from the end of last term," Harry answered.

McGonagall did not show surprise at the answer, acting as if she had expected that. Instead, she turned to the quietest member. "Ms Weasley, are you asking to be withdrawn too? I would not expect your parents to support this."

The redhead smiled slightly. "Actually, my Head of Family is very supportive of a change in schools."

The professor furrowed her brow slightly at the strange wording of the answer. "Very well," she finally said. "Wait here for a moment and I shall retrieve what you need and we can adjourn to Mr Black's house." She left the room through a side door.

Harry looked at Hermione. "How are we doing on time?"

"We're cutting it close, but we'll make it."

They waited a few minutes for Professor McGonagall to return. She had several folders in hand. Drawing her wand, she cast a spell on her Floo and said, "House of Black". She turned to the students. "I assume Ms Delacour will need to return to her family?"

"Her family will be meeting us there, so she'll be coming with us," Harry answered as he stood and pulled Gabrielle over by the hand. He grabbed some Floo Powder and put it into the fireplace.

"No need to say the name, Mr Potter; I've locked the destination in," McGonagall told him.

He nodded and said slowly, "Gabrielle, follow me." He tossed the Floo Powder in and stepped into the green flames.

After several long seconds of spinning, he rolled out of a fireplace and landed on his back. Sitting up, he saw Sirius grinning at him and his parents chuckling. As he was about to get up, a little blonde witch came out of the fireplace and knocked him over, with her on top. She giggled and quickly kissed him before scrambling up. As he was about to get up again, Ginny came out of the fireplace and tripped over his feet, landing on top of him. Harry heard twin giggles this time, right before Ginny quickly kissed him and rolled away to get up. Before he could get up, Hermione came out and also landed on him. With an impish look, she also kissed him and rolled off to stand up.

The fireplace turned green one last time and Professor McGonagall came out and ended up standing over his legs. "Mr Potter, it is not wise to lie in front of the fireplace when people are using it. You can get trampled that way."

Giggles and laughter came from the rest of the room as the professor reached down and helped the boy up.

"Here are the forms you need to sign for your children, Mr and Mrs Granger." McGonagall held two out to them. "And..." she paused as she looked around the room. "Where are the Weasleys?"

"I will sign for Ginny, since she is now a member of the House of Potter," Harry told her, standing up as straight as he could to look more official.

"Mr Potter..." she started sternly.

"Minerva," Sirius gently interjected, stopping her. "I witnessed the ceremony that transferred Ginny into the House of Potter. Harry is indeed responsible for her. However, if you must have an adult sign, then I think it would be appropriate for Harry to sign and then for Dan to co-sign."

"This is most unusual."

"Yes, it is, but it is also all legal and the current state of affairs, with Arthur Weasley's full cooperation," Sirius replied, showing a side of him that he had never displayed at school before: one of leadership and seriousness. When she did not argue and simply handed the last form to Harry, Sirius smiled and called, "Zoot!" as he lightly clapped his hands.

A small house-elf popped in.

"Please go to the Beauxbatons carriage at Hogwarts and tell Mr and Madam Delacour that we are ready for them."

The elf acknowledged her instructions and popped back out.

"So they are in on this too?" McGonagall asked suspiciously.

"Yes," Sirius said with his Marauder grin. "It's a conspiracy between the Grangers, Potters, Delacours, and the House of Black."

"I notice you did not name the Weasleys," she said stiffly.

Sirius shrugged as he continued to grin. "While not directly involved, they did play their part before they withdrew recently."

When the Grangers handed the three forms to her, McGonagall

looked them over. Seeing a Potter and a Granger signature on the last form, she looked at the young man. "Mr Potter, to make this valid, I need to see proof that you have responsibility for this student."

Harry nodded and pulled out the form in his pocket and handed it over.

McGonagall paled and gasped as she saw it. "You called in a Life Debt?"

At that moment, the fireplace turned green and Albus Dumbledore stepped into the room. "Minerva, you mentioned there was a problem with Mr Potter and his friends?"

The Transfiguration professor wordlessly handed over the three withdrawal forms and the Life Debt form.

Dumbledore frowned momentarily as he saw what they were before looking at the Grangers, his grandfatherly smile once more fixed firmly on his face. "I believe we had an agreement that Harry and your daughter would continue their education at Hogwarts."

"Headmaster," Dan calmly addressed him. "Our agreement had several conditions and if any one of them was violated, we were free to withdraw our children. At least one of them has already been broken."

"Oh?"

"Headmaster, you know very well that one of the conditions was that my son did not have to save anyone's life."

"Mr Granger, we were also quite specific that there was some danger inherent in the Triwizard Tournament and that did not count in our agreement," Dumbledore argued, still with his grandfatherly smile in place, although it was beginning to wear a little thin.

"If the problem had been with Ron Weasley - Harry's assigned person - we would concede your point, Headmaster. However," Dan's expression tightened, "the person he had to save was not his assigned person and if he had not done so - at risk to his own life - this young lady would have died." He held out his hand to indicate Gabrielle.

At that moment, the Delacours Flooed into the room, bringing a sharp stop to all conversation for a moment. Apolline smiled when she saw the children and moved over to stand behind Harry and Gabrielle. Her husband went with her and stood next to her and behind Ginny.

"Our apologies for being late," Jean-Aimé said genially with a slight nod. "We had to say good-bye to our other daughter. What did we miss?"

Sirius quickly spoke up. "We have the withdrawal forms signed, but the Headmaster is protesting that the agreement with the Grangers is not broken and that Gabrielle's rescue was a normal part of the Triwizard Tournament and not something extra Harry had to do."

Apolline gave the Headmaster a blazing glare. "Are you trying to be," she waved her hand for a moment as she searched for the right word, "obstinate, or are you merely stupid?"

The Headmaster stood there and blinked at being called that, his smile now gone completely, while McGonagall looked shocked.

"My daughter would have died had not Harry been so quick to get there. He took it upon himself to rescue her because it was the right thing to do, something he would not have had to do if you had cast your spell correctly. So do not try to get away from your mistake, Headmaster." She spat his title out.

"And there was the condition that Harry would end the year like he started it," Emma continued heaping trouble on the old man. "Because of your mistake, this little girl will not leave my son alone." She indicated the little Veela who was still holding Harry's hand.

"Harry, stay!" Gabrielle cried and threw arms around Harry's waist tightly, burying her face on his chest, not letting go - just as she had been instructed hours earlier.

"I don't know how much therapy we're going to have to go through to help her and my son deal with this problem - one he did not have at the beginning of the year," Emma explained. "You did not hold up your end of the bargain, Headmaster."

"But Harry must be in the Tournament or he'll lose his magic..."

"I'll return for the third task at the end of June, Headmaster. In the meantime, I'll attend the school that was on my entry into the Goblet of Fire - which was none," Harry told him confidently.

Dumbledore closed his eyes and slowly sighed. One of the forms in his hand suddenly left him, causing him to hastily look up. He saw Harry catch the paper.

"I'll take my form showing the transfer of Ginny to my family back, thank you," Harry said smugly as he put his wand and the form away.

"You don't need a copy," Sirius slipped in with a pleasant smile, "you only needed to see it to verify it. Now that everything is in order and all the questions have been cleared up, I believe this meeting is over. Thank you for coming and bringing the students, Minerva. Oh, and we'll expect you to refund the remainder of this term's tuition fees for Harry and Hermione to the Grangers. The fees for Ginny can be returned to the Weasleys as they originally paid them."

Minerva nodded at everyone before quietly wishing them a good

evening and using the Floo Network to return to school.

Everyone looked at Albus, who was still standing there deep in thought.

"Albus? The Floo Powder is in the blue dish on the mantle if you're not sure where to look," Sirius said helpfully.

"Harry," Dumbledore said suddenly. "You must remember our other project we are working on. Surely you would not abandon your friends in our time of need?"

Harry squared his shoulders and lifted his head a little higher. "I have not forgotten nor is it being abandoned. I am merely changing schools while I prepare for that. I am leaving Hogwarts because you didn't make it safe enough." When Dumbledore started to object, Harry added, "You are the Headmaster. As Sirius has taught me, a Head of House is responsible for his family and all of its members. In the same way, you are responsible for the school and all of its students."

"Well said, Harry, you remember your traditions well," Sirius said with a grave nod and then a look at Dumbledore, daring him to disagree.

"It is difficult, but it is the right way," Jean-Aimé said.

"And I stand behind my son and daughter," Dan Granger said unexpectedly.

Dumbledore looked around and saw a wall of solidarity. "Very well." He looked at Harry with disappointment. "In addition to the third task, there will be a short meeting about a month before it, which you will need to attend."

"If you will owl me via Sirius, I will be there," Harry agreed.

With a grim look and a nod, Dumbledore turned and left through the Floo Network.

"We did it; we're free," Harry breathed more than said, but everyone heard him. Gabrielle was still hugging him, but everyone else crowded around for a hug or pat on the back.

When they broke apart, Sirius shot a spell at the fireplace. "There, no more visitors tonight. Let's have dinner and celebrate a successful plan and, dare I say, prank on a meddling old man." Everyone laughed and headed for the dining room.

After dinner and several hours of talking, Sirius assigned everyone a bedroom for the night. Harry's bond-mates had been assigned separate rooms, and he joined each of them in turn.

With Gabrielle, it was merely a few minutes for her to sit on his lap and for a hug. He wondered what she would be like as he got to know her, and she him. The idea of having a bond-mate that he knew not at all before bonding was more than just a little awkward. Her younger age and looks did not help either. He was going to have to be very careful around her for some time while they got to know one another. He truly hoped she worked out as well as Hermione and Ginny, as he hoped he could make them all happy.

With Ginny, he spent the better part of fifteen minutes snuggling and snogging. He wanted to give her some time alone since they had been afforded none since the bonding with Gabrielle.

He liked Ginny and knew she honestly liked him. She had been a bit intimidated at first, with how much she idolized him as The-Boy-Who-Lived, but she had quickly outgrown that as they had gotten to know each other. Now, she was a fun person who liked to give hugs, snuggle up to him on the couch, give him kisses from time to time, and she liked to tease him. She also liked to fly and could talk Quidditch, not to mention that she struck him as being above

average in intelligence. He did not quite understand her desire to exercise so much: she was practically a fanatic about it at times, but he did have to admit that he liked how the exercises made her look. Her hair was certainly the first thing that grabbed his attention, and she was cute. The fact that her breasts were small did not bother him at all; he thought her great-looking legs more than made up for her small bustline, and the years might change her body further. She was growing up to be pretty, or so he thought, and a person he enjoyed being around.

Hermione received the same sort of time as Ginny did, alone time just for the two of them, though she preferred to snuggle and talk with a dash of snogging, rather than snuggle and snog with a dash of talking.

He knew that Hermione doubted herself on her looks, but he thought she was turning out to be very pretty. Of course, the first thing anyone thought about when they considered Hermione, assuming they knew her at all, was her incredible intelligence. He wondered if she might be borderline genius. She was also so self-disciplined that he was envious of her at times. Her eidetic memory was something else that stood out about her. Despite all of that which made many call her a "bookworm," Hermione was also a very caring person. She was not as demonstrative as Ginny, but Hermione did like to snuggle - usually leaning against him while reading a good book. There was no doubt in his mind that she cared about all of her true friends greatly. He was very grateful for her level-headedness and desire for everyone to get along. He also had not failed to notice her growing breasts. Her shape was more "womanly" he thought, and overall very pleasing to look at. He was glad she was around him, not only because of how attractive she was becoming, but because of everything they had shared and how much he enjoyed her company.

After Hermione's time, Harry brought Gabrielle and Ginny to Hermione's room and the brunette cast the Fidelius charm on each parchment that held the girl's secret, making Harry the Secret Keeper.

The secrets were small to hide, but three of the charms exhausted Hermione. The girls shooed Harry to his room and helped Hermione get undressed and into bed. Everyone in the House of Black slept well that night.

At Hogwarts, Minerva McGonagall had spent a very contemplative evening. Her old friends Filius and Pomona had listened attentively as they shared most of a bottle of single-malt Scotch. They assured Minerva that she could have done very little to have prevented this latest change at the school.

In the second tallest tower of the castle, Albus Dumbledore paced in his office. So many plans ruined and now Potter had left the school as well. Even if he was still Chief Warlock, he doubted that he could pass a law forcing all students, and Harry in particular, to stay in school until their normal course-work was finished; nor did he think Harry would obey it. He thought it quite possible that the Grangers would simply move out of England and Sirius, being on the Wizengamot, would warn them well ahead of time.

Harry Potter was simply out of his control unless he could find something to bring Harry back by the end of the Tournament, but he had no idea what. Hermione Granger was the only enticement he could think of, and she was going with him, as was the Weasley/Potter girl.

He sighed yet again during his long mental debate. He had almost certainly lost the support of the Weasleys with the loss of their daughter. Damn Sirius for telling Harry about the traditions. He needed an ignorant and compliant Harry - all of his plans always had required that.

Then there was the problem of Voldemort. Severus had indicated that his Dark Mark was slowly growing darker, more easily seen, indicating that the Dark Wizard was slowly gaining strength. In addition, Croaker was being most meddlesome. The man had found

a Horcrux in this very castle just before Christmas.

Dumbledore dropped into his chair and sighed. Looking up, he saw his phoenix staring back. "Do you have any advice or perhaps a song of comfort?"

The immortal bird chirped once and shook its head, indicating he had no answer to give.

Harry slowly woke, feeling very warm and comfortable. As he blinked, he heard a giggle and realized there was someone sitting on the side of his bed. Without the need to look for them, he reached for his glasses and put them on. Gabrielle came into view and he could now see that she was watching him with interest. Glancing around, he saw Hermione and Ginny on the other side of the room, leaning against the wall. All the girls were fully dressed.

«You're very cute when you sleep,» Gabrielle told him, sitting next to him on the bed.

«Thanks,» he croaked, eliciting another giggle from the girl. He looked at her for a moment. «You should be using English.»

She gave him a cute pout. "English speak hard," she slowly said.

«You are doing better. Has listening to English for the last day helped you?»

"Some."

«Come, Gabrielle,» Ginny said. «Harry must get up and get dressed. You have awakened him.»

"I help him," she said slowly and with an enthusiastic smile. The older girls chuckled while Harry blushed.

«That is not a good idea. I will not help him in that way,» Hermione said slowly, making no attempt to hide her amused expression.

«Yet,» Ginny smugly answered, earning her a playful shove from her friend. She walked over to Gabrielle and pulled the lightly protesting little girl along, while Hermione strolled out. As Ginny was about to close the door, she turned back to Harry. "Don't take too long or I'll come back and help you get dressed, no matter what state you're in." She left with a wink, which caused Harry to gulp.

When he was truly alone, Harry jumped out of bed and threw yesterday's jeans on before he found some clothes and hurried to the bathroom. He figured that as long as he had a locked door, he was safe and could shower and get dressed at his leisure. A long hot shower sounded wonderful.

However, when he got out of the shower, he found all of his clothes gone. He groaned in exasperation. At least they had left him his towel this time.

Peeking out the door, he saw that the hallway was clear. Hoping for the best, he dashed for his room at the other end of the hallway with a hand on the towel wrapped around his waist. He made it safely and locked his door, only to turn around and find Ginny sitting on his bed, with his clothes beside her.

"You were taking too long, so I thought I would help." When he sputtered in embarrassment, she laughed lightly and got up. "Hurry down, Harry, or I'll send Gabrielle up." She winked at him again and left him alone.

She is such a tease, he thought, although he was grinning largely. Wasting no time, he got dressed and went downstairs to find breakfast. He hoped every morning was not going to be like this one, although a small part of him had enjoyed the playful behaviour. A time with ... family, he decided.

In the dining room, he found everyone else already there and they were starting to serve the food.

"Nice of you to join us, Harry," Sirius joked with him. "I thought maybe the girls had failed and I'd have to come up next."

"You sent them up?"

"Well, let's say that I didn't stop them when I knew what they were about to do."

Harry glanced at his parents and the Delacours. All four of them were looking at him with amusement. "Oh Merlin..." Everyone chuckled.

Jean-Aimé lightly cleared his throat to get everyone's attention. "To matters at hand... Yesterday, I secured a Portkey for you." He pulled a small silver goblet about three inches tall out of a pocket and set it in front of Dan. "You can use this, even though you have no magic, because the magic in the Portkey will do the work. However, because of that, you must wait about four hours between uses. If a magical person, such as your daughter or son is using it with you, then it can draw magic from them and it is usable again in a couple of minutes. Because you are travelling between countries, I had to anchor it at both ends, so it will only work in the living room of your home and in the entry way of my home, obviously, taking you to the other place."

Dan and Emma looked at it carefully. "How do you make it work?" she asked curiously.

"Once everyone who is going is touching it - and you are limited to eight people at the most - you say 'Take us to the other home', and you will be transported. The trip will take about ten or fifteen seconds. I will say that it is generally not a good idea to show up in the middle of the night, unless there is an emergency, as the guardians of our

home tend to be a little more ... aggressive at night. Otherwise, you are welcome to come whenever you like," Jean-Aimé finished with a smile.

"Thank you very much," Dan told him.

"Yes, thank you. We'll make sure we owl ahead," Emma said mischievously, enjoying using Wizarding slang. Her daughter rolled her eyes. "Unless you have a phone?"

"I do at the office, but not at home. I'll give you the number later in case you want to leave a message there," Jean-Aimé replied.

"Thank you," Emma said with a smile. "It's nice to find magical people who understand some of our conveniences."

Jean-Aimé chuckled. "I don't understand all of your cultural references, but I can function in your world reasonably well. You have the day off from work, yes?"

"We do, but we must be back at work tomorrow," Dan answered.

"Then let's journey to your home, you can pack a bag, and come visit us for the day. You will have a chance to see where your children are staying. You can return tomorrow morning, or this evening if you prefer."

"Yes, please come and visit," Apolline echoed her husband's invitation. "I know I would want to see where my children were staying if they were going to another country."

Emma looked happier. Not that she had been exactly unhappy before, but this did increase her comfort level. "Thank you, we'd like that very much." Dan agreed too.

"You are welcome too, Sirius," Jean-Aimé said, looking at their host.

"In that case, let me pack some clothes and we can be off," Sirius agreed jovially. He left the dining room to pack, as did everyone else.

Twenty minutes later, Sirius took the Delacours to the Grangers' house so they could see where it was. The three adults then returned and Side-Along-Apparated the Grangers and four children. The Grangers quickly repacked their bags for another night away and everyone gathered in the Grangers' living room.

"Wait a minute," Sirius said suddenly. "There are nine of us here and the Portkey only takes eight. I guess I'll have to visit another time." He looked disappointed.

"Nonsense," Jean-Aimé stopped him. "I still have my original return Portkey. I will take it and let the rest of you use the other." He pulled out a small wooden figurine, tapped his wand to it, and left.

"Everyone gather around and touch the goblet," Apolline directed. "Very good, Dan, say the activation phrase."

"Take us to the other home." Dan felt a jerk behind his navel and found he could not remove his finger from the goblet. He felt a slow spinning sensation as they were carried along. He looked at Emma and saw that she was looking slightly unwell, but then she had never liked the wilder rides at amusement parks.

Eventually, everyone but Apolline landed in a heap. Dan assumed it was a matter of experience. This was a lot faster and cheaper than going to Heathrow and taking a plane, but he wondered if Emma would want to do this again. He did not mind the trip, but then again he did not feel as green as she looked.

"Are you all right, dear," Dan asked as he helped his wife up.

"Yes, I'll be fine shortly. However, I'm not sure I want to make that trip

very often." She nor her husband saw the pleased looks from their children at hearing that.

"Ah, good, you have arrived," Jean-Aimé said as he walked into the entry way and over to his wife. "Let me show you Chateau Delacour."

Emma took a good look around for the first time and her mouth nearly fell open. The elegance floored her. There was marble, fine wood panelling and trim, not to mention the large mirror with a golden frame that shone as if made of real gold. Then she caught sight of the large chandelier above her. She had always thought they were well off and lived in a nice neighbourhood, but this was several levels above them.

"Chateau Delacour was started nearly sixteen hundred years ago when my ancestors settled this area, or more realistically removed the Moor barbarians that inhabited this region," Jean-Aimé said as he led them into the rest of the house.

"Where are we?" Hermione asked.

"The Chateau and our nearly thirty thousand acres are in the western foothills of the southern range of the French Alps," he answered easily as he guided them into a large and richly decorated room, which included a fireplace large enough for several men to stand side-by-side in it, at least as long as they were not overly tall. The back wall was entirely windows and glass doors and he beckoned them over. "Come, the balcony will give you a good view of most of the land."

"What do you do with thirty thousand acres?" Dan asked as Emma gasped when she got her first look out the windows. Everyone slowly moved out onto the balcony in awe, looking at the rows upon rows of grapevines over low rolling hills. "I suppose that answers my question," he said in a quiet voice.

"Should we have heard of your label?" Emma asked.

Jean-Aimé and Apolline both chuckled. "Not unless you are a true wine connoisseur or magical. The best ten percent of our wine is sold around non-magical Europe; the rest makes up wine that is sold to the Wizarding world."

"I enjoy wine, but I'm afraid I'm not a wine expert nor do I buy anything costing more than forty Pounds a bottle." And usually less, Emma thought, but did not want to say.

Jean-Aimé nodded very matter-of-factly. "There is nothing to be embarrassed about, you are very average in your tastes. We have found a niche market, or really two, and cater to them."

As they turned to go back inside, Ginny whispered, "Bloody hell!"

Harry nodded his agreement. Now that they were outside, they were looking at a large manor house and it would obviously not create problems with them all staying here.

"Ah yes," their host said agreeably. "The house has been added onto several times by some of my ancestors who seemed think that bigger is better. We rarely use more than a quarter of the space, although, perhaps Apolline will help us to use another room or two soon." He gave his wife a pleased look, who looked down demurely.

"That makes sense, the children will need a room or two for their schooling before next September," Dan said blithely.

"That is true," Jean-Aimé agreed with a slight nod, "however, I was referring to the fact that Apolline has finally agreed to a third child, and hopefully a son."

"By the way you say that, it sounds as if you can pick the gender," Emma blurted out, before reddening slightly. "Oh, I'm sorry, that's

really none of my business."

"It's all right," Apolline told her with an understanding smile. "There are potions to help influence the gender, but my Veela nature makes them less likely to work correctly, just like my nature tends to only allow females. However," now her eyes sparkled with delight, "this is also a magical way for the man to help ensure a male is born, if my husband wants a son badly enough."

Jean-Aimé now looked out over his fields with a slightly redder complexion.

Harry's eyes went wide and he paled as he looked at Hermione, who shook her head slightly, looking just as uncomfortable as she turned to look at Ginny, who also looked puzzled and like she really did not want to know more details. Gabrielle looked the most lost among them all.

A laugh from Sirius caused everyone to look at him. When he got his breath back, he pointed at the kids and said, "Their expression at that conversation was priceless, thank you." As the other adults all chuckled, Sirius slapped Harry on the back. "Don't worry, kiddo, with three wives, I doubt you'll have to worry about that. I suspect one of them will give you a son." All four teens became red from embarrassment as Jean-Aimé led them back inside for the rest of the tour.

In the family area, Hermione, Ginny, and Harry were each assigned a bedroom, all near Gabrielle's. In another wing of the house, they were shown a couple of rooms that Apolline said had been used historically for teaching at home.

All in all, everyone was happy with the arrangement, including Dan and Emma.

The next morning, Harry slowly woke feeling very comfortable, like

he was in the perfect place, where he was accepted and always belonged. Opening his eyes, realized there was a lot of silvery-blond hair in front of him. That made him realize that someone was snuggled up in front of him again. Checking his hands, he found they were in safe places, but then he realized he was having a "morning reaction" and Gabi was far too young to learn about this. He slowly tried to move backwards, only to find he could not. That was when he realized someone else was pressed against him from behind.

"Lay still, Harry, it's still too early to get up," someone else whispered in his ear. He knew that voice, but turned his head to make sure. Without a doubt, there was a lot of red hair back there. Lovely, he thought sarcastically.

"Harry, would you care to explain this?" came another voice, and this one sounded peeved.

He reached up with the arm that was not under Gabi's head and grabbed his glasses. Now that he could see clearly, Hermione was obviously staring at him as she stood at the end of the bed, still in her nightgown, and she did not look happy.

"I didn't do anything," he said in what he realized immediately afterward sounded a lot like a whine. "I went to bed like normal and woke up a couple of minutes ago to find this. I'm still trying to figure out what happened." He had to admit, though, that Hermione's displeasure had cured his "problem".

"Ginny?" Hermione called impatiently.

The redhead yawned and rolled away from Harry slightly. "I got up to go to the bathroom last night and saw Gabrielle heading in here. I was too tired to take her back, so I thought the next best thing was to come in here too and play chaperone."

Hermione shook her head. «Gabrielle, what do you have to say? You know you should not be in here.»

«Harry is comfortable and warm,» the blonde said sleepily.

«I agree,» Ginny said lazily with satisfaction in her voice.

«Up, quickly, before someone comes,» Hermione urged them.

«Yes, hurry,» Harry agreed, pushing Gabrielle a little.

Ginny crawled out of Harry's bed, as did Gabrielle. But when Gabrielle got out, she looked back and saw Harry in his T-shirt and boxers.

"Good," she said teasingly.

Harry grabbed the sheet and whipped it around him. "Go," he hissed. His two sleeping partners left the room and Hermione stared at him. "What? I said it wasn't my fault. Maybe you need to have a talk with them, you know, lay down some ground rules."

She let out a deep breath as she looked at him. "This is your bedroom, so I suppose you're right. I'll take care of it."

"Thanks, Hermione. Apolline might not care ... well, Sirius might not either ... but I bet everyone else does, and I don't want to get into trouble even if we are a family," he told her honestly.

"I know, Harry. I'll take care of it. You should get dressed."

"Thanks. And Hermione?" She stopped as she was about to walk out and looked at him. "You look nice this morning."

She looked embarrassed. "In this old thing? My hair is all crazy, too, and..."

"Hermione?" She looked at him and started blushing more as he got out of bed and walked over to her. "I like it when you're made up all fancy, like for the Yule Ball, but I like the normal Hermione more. This is the one I want to live with." He kissed her on the cheek, causing her to step back into the hallway in surprise. With a smirk, he quietly closed the door, very pleased with himself. Successful teases should always be enjoyed, he thought. It was even better when they were true.

At breakfast, Hermione could barely look at him without blushing.

"Is everything all right, you two?" Emma asked. "Please tell me you didn't prank each other in the bathroom again."

Hermione would not look at her mother, but Harry did and smiled. "No, Mum, no pranks. Everything is how it should be." A discreet glance around showed Ginny to be the only person giving him anything more than a normal understanding look, and she looked pleased. Well, Sirius was giving him a slightly disappointed look as if he wanted more details, but Harry ignored it.

Soon, Dan and Emma gave their children, including Ginny, a hug and farewell. Emma also went over to Gabrielle and gave her a hug. "Welcome to the family," she said softly and slowly. The little girl hugged her back tightly.

Sirius also gave each of the children a hug and wished them well. When he got to Harry, who was last, he also whispered to his godson, "Would you like to have a little fun with Dumbledore for not preventing you from being in the Triwizard Tournament?"

Harry nodded enthusiastically.

"Consider it done. And Harry? Take good care of the girls, that's your most important duty now." He rubbed Harry's head and gave him a

caring smile.

Harry tried to shrug away from him, but he was enjoying it anyway. "Thanks, Sirius. I'll miss you."

"We'll all be back from time to time, kiddo."

A moment later, the Grangers and Sirius left.

Apolline took charge. «Your tutors come tomorrow and your school work begins. Today will be a free day and Gabrielle can show you around. All of you, except Gabrielle, speak French from now on. We will have an hour of French lessons every day, starting tomorrow. Go, have fun.» She waved them away and they took off running.

Gabrielle showed them a few more parts of the house, including where she liked to hide when she wanted to be alone. She also showed them the grounds outside, including the vineyards. She explained that all the workers were Squibs and so if they saw magic, it was all right. Her father had a business office on the other side of the property where Muggles came from time to time, so that was the only place they had to stay away from. Flying was accepted, as long as it was near the big manor house. Harry, Hermione, and Ginny all agreed it was a great place to stay.

During the afternoon, Harry whispered to Ginny, "Please stay with Gabrielle for a while. I need to talk with Hermione."

Ginny raised an eyebrow and gave him a smirk, but she agreed with a nod.

When Hermione gave him a questioning look, he leaned over and whispered in ear. "I need to give you something. Please come with me." He grabbed her hand and led her towards another part of the house.

She studied him as they walked, wondering what he was doing. Then he winked at her and she almost stumbled. Harry never winked at her. He also gave her a bit of a goofy grin. Deciding there was only one way to know if her guess about his present behaviour was correct, she tried to be patient.

"What are we doing in here? Do you need to research something?" she asked as he pulled her into their classroom.

He put up a privacy charm on the door. "No, not exactly."

"I don't understand," she said slowly as he put his arms around her.

"I promised you some time with just me as soon as we could arrange it. I gave you a little yesterday, but I thought you deserved more. I know it hasn't been easy on you to deal with yet another girl in our bond, and it will affect you the most because she's younger and you're the oldest." He stopped talking and kissed her. It took a few seconds but she started to respond and wrapped her arms around him.

After a nearly a full minute of kissing, he pulled back. "We can spend the next hour just like that, or we can sit, snuggle, and talk. We can do anything you want, Hermione. This time is yours and yours alone."

She smiled at him gratefully. "Thank you, Harry. You really are considerate and I love that about you."

He kissed her again before he remembered he had something else he had to do. "I'm not sure I've ever told you, Hermione, but you should know that I love you. You're mine and you always will be mine; you have my heart."

"Oh, Harry!" She pulled him into a hug so tight, he thought she might bruise a rib, but he loved it. When she let him go, she kissed him

passionately for a few minutes before asking him little questions about how he felt about her and their new "family." Kissing came between every question and they both enjoyed the time.

When their time was up, they strolled back to find the others. Leaving Hermione to have a discussion about appropriate behaviour with Gabrielle, Harry led a smiling Ginny to another room in the large house. He cast a privacy spell on the door after they had entered and gave her a big grin.

Ginny looked at him expectantly.

Since his line worked so well last time, he decided to use it again. "I promised you some time with just me as soon as I could. I gave you a little time yesterday, but I thought you deserved some more. I know it hasn't been easy on you to deal with another girl in our bond, and I know you'll have extra work because she's younger." He stopped talking and he kissed her. Ginny immediately started to respond and wrapped her arms around him.

"Wonderful," she said dreamily, sounding just like Luna.

"We can spend our time like that," he said, breathing a little harder after the kiss, "or we can snuggle and talk, or whatever you want for the next hour."

Ginny's grin soon matched the size of his for a brief moment, before doubt started to plague her. "Harry, do you still love me? I know you managed to fit me in after Hermione, but with three of us and now that I'm part of your family anyway... Are you going to give me up as a wife?"

He pulled her tightly to him and rubbed her back. "I'll never give you up," he told her softly, speaking into her hair. "You're mine, Ginny, and you will be my wife one day. You'd better get used to that idea. We'll find some way to work this out with the four of us, but never

doubt my feelings for you."

Her arms tightened around him as well.

"I know I've never really told you, Ginny, but I do love you."

Ginny pulled back for only a second so she could move her arms. Her hands moved up and her fingers threaded through his hair so she could pull his head down to hers and give him a searing kiss. They kept that up with only a little talking until Harry's hour and a little more was gone.

Once he realized the time, he told her, "I think it's your turn to spend some time with Hermione. Only, please don't talk about me too much."

She chuckled. "I don't think you have any say in the matter," she told him saucily and then stole a quick kiss before they left.

They found Hermione and Gabi talking and laughing in Hermione's room. Harry let go of Ginny's hand and held out his hands for the last girl. "Gabi?"

A smile lit her face and Harry could feel a little bit of pressure on his mind. He suspected she was so happy she did not even know she was letting her Veela allure out. He took her hand and led her to the back balcony. He decided he wanted a more "public" place this time.

He found a comfortable chair and pulled her sideways into his lap and held her close. She snuggled in and seemed to enjoy just being close. He was glad she was satisfied with that and kissed the top of her head. This was really all he could give her right now.

«Did you like talking to Hermione and Ginny?»

She nodded. "She ... they ... are nice."

«Yes, they are. I hope you really get to know them. We'll talk and get to know each other, too.»

"Harry is ... very nice."

He chuckled. «I am glad you think so. I think we will become good friends too.»

"Hermione said ..." she paused after a short frustrated sound. «She said I must protect you. No more girls. She likes me, but no more.»

He understood, really he did, but he also knew he could not control his magic. «I think that is a good idea. Three girls are plenty for me.»

"Fleur is ..." she paused again, «jealous.»

«I know, but she will have to find her own boy.» Gabi giggled. He squeezed her waist a little. «We will have to work hard so the four of us can live together. Can you do that?»

"Yes," she said as she nodded. "For you."

«I will make it work for you, Gabi.» She seemed to almost purr in satisfaction, making Harry wonder what she would be like when she transformed. He knew so little about Veela. There was nothing to do but to learn to love her.

He held her closely and they talked until Apolline came out. The woman had a sad smile on her face.

«I wished it had not happened,» she told him, answering the unasked question, «but if it must, I think you are an excellent choice, Harry. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes.»

Harry led Gabi back into the house only to find Hermione and Ginny

giving him knowing smiles. He was very certain he did not know what to know what they had planned.

The next day, Harry awoke alone again. Part of him wished it was not so, but he knew it was for the best at this time. He quickly showered, got dressed, and went down for breakfast. Hermione was already there.

"Where are Ginny and Gabrielle?"

"They'll be here soon," she replied.

«Good morning, Harry, Hermione,» Jean-Aimé greeted them as he settled into his chair, a newspaper in his hand. «I sent an elf to Paris this morning to find one of these. I found it amusing and thought you might, too,» he said with a grin as he handed the newspaper to Harry.

Hermione leaned over to look at it with him, right as Ginny came into the room. Hermione's gasp got Ginny's attention so she joined them to read over Harry's shoulder.

Harry Potter Leaves Hogwarts

Last evening it was announced that Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Lived, has left Hogwarts to attend school elsewhere. The announcement was made by his godfather, Wizengamot member Sirius Black.

"Yesterday, Harry Potter and two of his closest friends left Hogwarts to attend a different school. I won't say where at this time, but I will say that the lack of safety at Hogwarts was Harry's primary concern, and I have to agree.

"During his three and half years at Hogwarts, he's had to fight a troll, a basilisk, and a Dementor - all by himself - and this year he was forced to compete in the Triwizard Tournament at age fourteen ... a

tournament which was supposed to be restricted to those aged seventeen and above because of its history of killing participants.

"Mr Potter and his friends that left with him were saddened to leave behind their other good friends, but all of them felt it was necessary as they didn't know what else might happen after Harry had to risk himself yet again to rescue a drowning person from the lake a few days ago.

"I call upon the Hogwarts Board of Governors to investigate the safety of our children at Hogwarts and why the Headmaster is unable to protect our children from unusual attacks.

"I ask everyone to leave Mr Potter and his friends alone so they can have a normal life. For his friends still at Hogwarts, you can write to Mr Potter by sending your letters to me and I'll see that he receives them. Also, you may want to consider other schools yourself, if needed changes are not implemented during this academic year."

Naturally, we at the Daily Prophet were shocked to hear this, as was everyone else in the atrium of the Ministry of Magic where Mr Black made the announcement. It appears that closer attention will be paid to Hogwarts and to Headmaster Albus Dumbledore. As you may remember, he was removed from his positions as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and as Supreme Mugwump of the ICW last year.

When we asked about Mr Potter's requirement as a champion in the Triwizard Tournament, and if he had been excused from it, Mr Black responded, "Mr Potter will return for the third task, as required."

More news of Mr Potter and Hogwarts as we receive it.

"Uh, wow," Harry said in surprise when he finished reading the story.

"You knew that your leaving was going to be news," Hermione reminded him as Ginny rubbed his shoulder for a moment to give him

comfort before she took her chair.

"Well, yeah," he agreed, "but the front page?"

Jean-Aimé chuckled. «You are popular news, Harry. And,» he cleared his throat, «aren't you supposed to be using French?» he asked with a wry smile.

Harry sheepishly nodded and Hermione looked a little embarrassed for forgetting.

Gabrielle walked in and took her seat, as did Apolline. Harry passed the paper to his "mother" who found it amusing. They spent the rest of the meal talking about Sirius's fun back in England.

Neville Longbottom looked at a Daily Prophet that he had borrowed from a friend. While he found what Sirius Black had done amusing, it could not be fully appreciated without glancing at the head table and seeing the truly sour look on the Headmaster's face. Knowing Harry's desire for privacy, he was sure this was all Black's doing, but he would have to write Harry to find out, as well as to say hello.

He felt privileged to know Harry's secret ... or rather, the many secrets about Harry and the girls, he amended. He looked down a few seats to where Ron was sitting and saw Ginny's brother looking down at his plate with an unhappy look. That did not keep Ron from eating more than Neville ever could at a single meal, but he could tell that Ron was not pleased with the way things were. The redhead had been quiet and spending time alone ever since the evening his sister had left school with Harry. He would give Ron space to work it out on his own.

As breakfast ended, Apolline looked at the three teens. «Please get your Charms and Transfiguration books and go to the classroom. I'll bring your tutor shortly and introduce him to you. Gabrielle, you may go with them. You and I will work next door while they are busy.»

A few minutes later, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny had their books and wands out, eagerly awaiting their tutor. Quills, ink, and parchment were already in the room, along with desks for everyone. Gabrielle was standing next to Harry, holding and playing with his hand.

Apolline walked in with a very tall man in Wizard robes with a bag hanging from his shoulder. He was older with greying hair, but had a kind face. «This is Professor Legrand. He will tutor you in Charms and Transfiguration until lunch time. He will be here once a week. Professor, I would like to introduce you to Mr Harry Potter, Miss Hermione Granger, Miss Ginny Potter, and my youngest daughter, Gabrielle, who will not be in your classes.»

«Mr Potter,» began their new teacher in a deep voice, «it is a pleasure to meet and work with you. Congratulations on your strategies and fine wand work in the Triwizard Tournament. If you do that well in class, you'll have no problems.»

«Thank you, Professor.»

«Miss Granger, I've seen your records from Hogwarts and I have no doubt you'll do well if you continue your fine work.»

«Thank you, Professor; I look forward to learning from you.»

He nodded to her and turned to Ginny. «Miss Weasley, your records also show good marks and leave me with the question of which year of material I should be teaching you. Several of your teachers indicated that you could probably handle fourth year too, if you had the opportunity. May I assume you study with your friends?»

«Thank you, Professor, and yes, I do study with them. I would like to be in class with them next year.»

«Very well, we shall see if that can be accomplished.» He turned to

his host. «The next four hours are mine, Mme Delacour?»

«Yes. I shall be next door if you need me. Come, Gabrielle.» With reluctance, Gabrielle dropped Harry's hand and followed her mother out.

«Let us have a review,» Legrand said in a neutral tone as he dug into his bag and started pulling objects out. «I shall give a spell and ask each of you to do it. After that, we shall try transfigurations on these objects.» The three teens each pulled their wands out and got ready.

Apolline sat her daughter down and pulled out a small box. Gabrielle recognized it as the box that held the Capture Stone for her training.

«Before we work on your Veela training, I want to work on another skill first. It is called meditation. Meditation requires you to think carefully about something and to try to understand it fully. For now, I want you to think about yourself. You must try to know yourself, try to understand yourself, even feel inside yourself to find your magic. Think of what makes you ... you,» she said with a knowing smile. «You will need to ignore Harry for this.» Gabrielle frowned at that, making her mother chuckle silently. «You may think of your bond-mate later, my daughter. For now, think of yourself. As you do, you will start to feel what makes you special; you will feel your magic. Once you do, you will be able to control it better. You will be able to control your Veela powers better too. Do you understand?»

"I think."

«Let's try. Sit comfortably and think 'into yourself'; search for your magic inside you. I will sit here and meditate too to give you some time.» Apolline made herself comfortable and closed her eyes as an example.

"Yes, mother." Gabrielle made herself comfortable and tried to think about herself, but it was hard. Deciding to follow her mother's

example, she closed her eyes and let her mind wander. After a few minutes, she realized that was no good, as her thoughts drifted to Harry. She sighed in her comfort of him.

"Not Harry!"

Her mother's sudden voice startled her, causing her eyes to fly open.

"I can tell by that look you're thinking of Harry. No. Think of you and your magic."

"Yes, mother." Gabrielle reapplied herself to her task. After a moment, she considered that Veela were creatures of fire, so maybe she should look for fire. A few minutes later, she thought she felt something fiery and started trying to follow the elusive feeling. It took a while, but eventually she thought she had trapped "her fire" so it could not run away. She looked at it and tried to become familiar with it. Before she realized what was happening, a voice pulled her back to reality again.

"Gabrielle, my daughter, come back to me."

Shaking her head to clear her other thoughts, Gabrielle opened her eyes and saw a look of concern on her mother.

"You have done nothing but take shallow breaths for the last two hours. Are you all right?"

"Two hours?"

"Yes. Are you all right?"

Gabrielle smiled. «I think I did it. I found my fire. It lead me on a chase, but I found it,» she said excitedly.

Her mother pulled her into a hug. "I am happy for you. Stand and

stretch." She helped her daughter up. "Do something for a few minutes while I go to the bathroom and then we will work on controlling your allure. Do you need to go too?"

Gabrielle shook her head, so her mother left. The young Veela walked over to the window and looked out across the vineyard. Seeing a large vine at the front, she closed her eyes and imagined a vine connecting her and Harry. Searching deeply within herself, she thought she found one. Following it, she felt a presence, a presence that gave her comfort: her Harry. She revelled in the feeling, enjoying this newfound ability.

Suddenly, something felt wrong. She almost panicked and came back to herself, but managed to maintain her contact with her mate. She felt around some more and again "touched" something wrong.

"Gabrielle!"

Her eyes jumped open and she lost her contact with Harry. Turning, she saw an alarmed look on her mother. «Mother! There is something wrong with Harry. He's, he's...» her hands practically flailing as she tried to find the words to explain it.

"Shush, little one. He is safe. I just saw him..."

«I know he safe, but there's something wrong with him. I felt it.»

"Come here, my little angel," Apolline beckoned with open arms. She also ignored her daughter's use of French, understanding that at this moment, the girl was too excited to use English.

Gabrielle rushed over and threw her arms around her mother.

"Now," her mother said as she rubbed her back during the hug, "tell me what happened."

«I, I imaged a vine connecting Harry and me. I searched within and found the vine and followed it. Oh, it was so wonderful, mother. It was like being hugged by him.» She almost purred in her satisfied sigh.

"And then what happened?"

«It was terrible. I touched something within him that was wrong; it was ... just wrong.»

Apolline continued to rub her daughter's back. "Stop and think about it and then try to tell me. If you can't find the words, tell me something that reminds you of it."

Gabrielle nodded. «It was ... like our grapes.»

"Our grapes? How?"

«Harry is a white grape. He would make a smooth and clear wine. But this, this feeling was a red grape and bitter. It does not belong with the white grapes,» Gabrielle explained.

Her mother chuckled. "You have been spending too much time with your father."

Gabrielle giggled, enjoying the lightened mood. «Father is fun. You are fun too, mother, but he's a different kind of fun.»

Apolline walked her daughter over to a chair and sat, pulling her daughter into her lap. "You're almost too big for this."

She shook her head. «Harry does it and he's not as tall as you.»

"No, he's not, but he's almost as tall as me." Apolline squeezed Gabrielle in a hug. "Let's try this again. Look into yourself for Harry. That magical connection should be your bond. Try to find it and tell me what you find. I'll be quiet and wait."

«Yes, mother,» she said dutifully as she closed her eyes and delved into her what she was starting to think of as "her Veela". Down and down she searched. It took a moment, but she finally found the connection once more. Carefully, she moved along it until she came to Harry. Again, she felt the powerful yet comforting feeling. Then she felt the wrongness again, like she was being shocked. She did her best to not move away, but she could not help it; the wrongness was far too wrong. How could her mate stand it? She pulled back and opened her eyes.

«It is terrible. Something is wrong in him. He must know.»

"Shush, my angel. You are in a difficult place; a place we do not know much about. Maybe you are feeling your bond-mates: Hermione and Ginny."

«No,» Gabrielle said adamantly. «I have never felt them. I only feel Harry. This is not Harry, but it's in him.»

Apolline's expression turned into a deep frown as she considered this. "Gabrielle, promise me you will not tell Harry or Hermione or Ginny of this until I have had time to think on this."

«No, mother. I do not keep secrets from my Harry,» she said fiercely.

"You misunderstand me, my daughter," Apolline said carefully. "I only ask it for the day. We will all talk of this after dinner tonight. I need some time to consider why you might feel this way about Harry, about something that may be there. Do you understand?"

Gabrielle looked at her. «Promise?»

"I promise to tell him tonight of what you feel." Gabrielle nodded her acquiesce. "Then go work on your English by reading a story book. We will work on controlling your allure tomorrow. I must go research

this feeling you have." She gave her daughter a kiss on the cheek and sent her over to the bookshelf for a young child's picture book in English.

Rising, Apolline headed for the house library. She wondered if she would have to go and visit the Veela colony this afternoon to search the large library there.

During lunch, the three older ones were vigorously discussing their lessons from the morning. Apolline was pleased they had all enjoyed it. She hoped the other tutors would be as well received.

«If I may have your attention?» All the children looked at her. «Jean-Aimé is away taking care of business. Please have a quiet afternoon inside, doing homework and whatever you like after that. I must run an errand, but I shall return before dinner.» While all looked like they wanted to know where she was going, none of them asked. Gabrielle probably would have normally, but she already knew.

Excusing herself, Apolline left them at the house, not worried about them because of the wards, elves, and other protections the children did not know about, and used the Floo network to visit her mother's house at the Veela colony. From there, she could easily walk to the colony's library. She might need to bring her mother into this, as her mother was considered an expert in magical theory. Apolline also hoped she could talk Harry and the girls into working with her mother, if that was needed.

Apolline returned to her home shortly before dinner. Jean-Aimé was already home and was talking quietly with Harry on the back balcony. She smiled as she watched the two talk for a moment. She assumed her husband was taking the time to get to know Harry better. Adopting her most normal expression, or so she hoped, she went to find the three girls to call them to dinner. Thank goodness for house-elves who can cook, she thought.

During dinner, Jean-Aimé asked, «How was your day? Did you like Monsieur Legrand?»

«He was very thorough and he struck me as being ...» Hermione looked lost before she finally said, "competent" in English.

«The word you are looking for is ... 'compétent',» he said with a smile.

She looked a little embarrassed. «Thank you. I did not realize it was one of those words that is the same, except for how you say it.»

«Think nothing of it,» he told her graciously. «Learning the language better is one reason you are here. Tomorrow, I believe you'll meet Monsieur Dubois, who will tutor you in Arithmancy and Ancient Runes.» He looked at his wife and received a confirming nod.

Her husband must have noticed she was not quite her normal self, as his curious gaze now turned to her. «How was your day, dear? I understand you went to see your mother.»

Apolline would have preferred to have waited until after dinner for this conversation, but perhaps it was better to get it over with and they were almost finished eating. «It was an interesting day. There was much magic in the house.»

Her husband nodded. «Yes, I can understand. We have never had four children before,» he commented lightly, still watching her.

«I started Gabrielle on meditation today and something interesting came up, so I went to the Veela colony to do a little research.» A glance around the table showed she had everyone's attention, but especially Hermione's. «It seems that Gabrielle had something of a break-through and was able to sense her connection to Harry.»

That produced several gasps. Before Harry could say anything, her

husband prompted her, «I assume that is important, but why?»

Apolline took a deep breath as she looked at her new son-in-law. «Harry, I need to know. Am I correct that your scar is a curse scar from when you were a baby? Also, have you ever had any trouble with it, like pain in it?»

All four of the children looked like they did not like that question, and Harry paled significantly.

«Did you find something wrong with him, Mother?» Gabrielle demanded.

«Hush, dear, I need Harry's answer first.» She looked at the boy, as did everyone else.

Harry thoughts were so jumbled, he fell back into English. "I, uh, I'm told I got it when Voldemort tried to kill me when I was little." No one flinched when he said the "evil name". His voice became very quiet. "I have had a little trouble with it, a few aches and pains from it in the last few years."

Apolline nodded, expecting an answer like that. She decided to use English to make sure he fully understood, knowing she would have to tell Gabrielle in French as well. "Harry, when Gabrielle pushed her senses to you and followed the connection between you, she said she felt like there was something there that was not part of you, and she did not think it was Hermione or Ginny. I was not sure whether she was imagining things or honestly feeling something wrong, as today is the first day she has ever tried to feel her own magic - let alone something as rare as your bond. I went to look for information that might tell me whether she was feeling something, well, real or not. With what little information I have, I think that she sensed your curse scar and that there is something unusual about it."

He nodded slowly, with several expressions going across his face.

Ginny immediately reached out and grabbed his hand, and he looked grateful for her support. Finally, he asked, "Is there a way to know more?"

"There is one spell I would like to do to see if it tells us more, and I believe I would like for you to talk with my mother about this." At his look of alarm, Apolline gave him a comforting look. "You'll need to meet her one day as she is family, but I think the sooner the better. Besides being family, she has a mastery in Arithmancy and is considered an expert in parts of Magical Theory. I think you should share all of your secrets with her and see if she can help. If anyone can help us understand what Gabrielle is feeling through her magic, I think it is her."

She watched him look to Hermione first, who was looking very excited. «I'm willing and I think you should,» the brunette told him, obviously wanting to meet the woman.

Ginny had a very thoughtful look when he turned to her. «I would like to see if Apolline's spell gives us any more information first, before we tell more people our secrets, but I'm willing if you are.»

Lastly, Harry turned to Gabrielle and raised an eyebrow at her. «I trust Grand-ma-ma and Grand-pa-pa.»

Harry turned back to Apolline. «I think I am willing to let her help, but I would like to know what your spell might show first.»

Apolline nodded and smiled. «Since we seem to be done eating, let's go into the other room.» She led them into the main family room, where the family usually relaxed together.

«Harry, please stand over on that side of the room. Girls, please stand over here opposite him, an arm's length apart. I am going to cast a Bond Detection charm and it will form a beam of light between you and everyone you have a bond with, Harry.»

Hermione was still excited. «Is this the same charm they would use at the Ministry to know we are really bonded?»

«Do you mean if you had to register with the British Ministry?» Jean-Aimé asked.

«Yes.»

«Yes, it is,» Apolline answered. «Now, everyone try to hold very still.» She cast the charm at Harry. Immediately, three thick, light blue beams formed, one between each of the girls and him, centred on their bodies. A very thin black beam slowly formed out of Harry's head and headed out to the right. «Jean-Aimé, a compass charm, quickly.»

He quickly pulled out his wand and did the charm. When his wand finished moving in the palm of his hand, it was obvious for everyone to see that the black beam was pointing only slightly west of north.

Apolline ended her charm and put her wand away. «I believe that is pointing towards England, and the fact that it came from your head instead of your body...»

Hermione was the first to react and ran across the room to engulf Harry in a hug. Ginny was only a step behind and Gabrielle quickly followed.

«He has a connection to the Dark Wizard,» Jean-Aimé stated the obvious softly as he moved over to his wife and pulled her into a loose hug.

It took several minutes before the girls loosened their grip on Harry. When they did, Apolline walked over and gave him a hug too.

«Harry, I would definitely advise you to talk to my mother now. If

anyone can help you, it's her,» Apolline said confidently as she stroked his head a few times.

He slowly nodded. «If I could have a few days?»

«I will invite her for the weekend. That will give you two full days. Why don't you all head to Harry's room. I'm sure you want to talk about this.» She received nods from all four of them as she looked at each. «I want a promise, pyjamas on everyone and they stay on all night. Agreed?» A firm look ensured she received four more nods. «Good-night.» She gave each of the children a kiss on the forehead and sent them off.

Her husband gave her a questioning look like she had lost her mind.

«They'll need each other for comfort after that revelation,» she whispered.

«But...»

«Hermione is very responsible, and I firmly do not believe anything will happen with all of them there. Let us retire to our room. You can hold me while I consider this problem,» she told him with a coy look.

Jean-Aimé did not look completely mollified, but he did not argue as he put his arm around his wife and escorted her to their bedroom.

Each of the girls held Harry's hand or touched him in some way as they walked with him. When they arrived upstairs near Harry's bedroom, Gabrielle said, «Everyone change and meet in Harry's room.» Giving Harry an impish look, she also said, «Maybe if I hurry you won't have finished changing yet.» She ran for her room with a giggle.

Ginny's face lit up. "Great idea!" She ran off towards her bedroom too.

Hermione smirked at him. "Maybe I should hold you here until they get back and then help you change." However, she let go of his hand and walked quickly to her room.

Harry finally figured out what was going on and ran for his room, slamming his door behind him. Figuring he needed to do the most important part first, he kicked off his shoes and pulled off his pants, quickly followed by pulling on his pyjama bottoms. He had barely finished unbuttoning his shirt when Gabrielle burst into his room in her lavender silk pyjamas.

Her happy face turned a little disappointed. «I was too slow to see it all, but at least I get to see you without your shirt.» She looked at him in anticipation.

He sighed as he finished changing, Ginny hurrying in as he buttoned up his top.

«You just missed him without a shirt on,» Gabrielle said.

«I am sure I will catch him that way later.» Ginny looked at Gabrielle thoughtfully. «You've been speaking French a lot today. Use more English.» She reached out and poked Gabrielle in the ribs, causing her to shriek and try and tickle Ginny back.

In the midst of their tickle fight, Harry was pulled into it as was Hermione. When they all gave up, they were breathing heavily and resting in a "pile" on Harry's bed. Gabrielle rolled over and looked at them all carefully, puzzling something out.

«What's wrong?» Hermione asked.

"How we sleep?" the little blonde said slowly. "You there," she pointed Hermione to Harry's left. "You there," she pointed at Ginny and at Harry's right. "Where I sleep?"

"Wait a minute..." Harry started to protest.

"Honestly, Harry," Hermione said as she shook her head. "Why do you think Apolline told us what she did? She knows we need to talk about your extra connection and that we'll all feel better if we stay together."

As he looked at her as if she was crazy, Ginny pulled the covers back. When Harry was slow to move, she pushed him over so he was in the middle and then she laid down on his right.

Hermione laid down on his left and then pulled Gabrielle over and put the girl between her and Harry before pulling the sheet up to their waists. "There," she said happily.

Harry just gave in; he knew he was not going to get his way on this. Of course, he did not have to search his feelings very far to know that he liked this, especially at this moment with all of his turbulent feelings. "Thank you," he quietly said and then kissed each girl on the forehead.

"Are you OK?" Ginny asked just as quietly before she turned off the light with her wand, leaving them in darkness, except for the pale moonlight coming in the window.

Harry thought about the question as he felt the warm bodies snuggle against him. "I don't completely know, but with you three, I'm sure you'll help me until it gets better."

«Grand-ma-ma will fix it,» Gabrielle said confidently. «She can fix anything.»

«English,» Hermione said and everyone heard a soft slap.

"Oww...shoulder."

Ginny giggled and even Harry snorted. "Careful, Gabi, she can be vicious," he said teasingly.

"Hush, you."

"Hmm, I wonder..."

"What, Harry?" Ginny asked.

"Well, I call Gabrielle 'Gabi' when it's just us," Harry explained, "and I can call you 'Gin'."

"I think I'd like that," Gin said and stretched up and kissed him on the cheek.

"But what do I call Hermione?" he wondered out loud. "'Hermy' doesn't work and neither does 'Herms'."

"Only if you have a death wish," Hermione fiercely told him, causing the other two girls to giggle quietly. "And don't even think about 'Mione'."

"You're making this hard," he complained.

"I like my name as it is," she retorted.

"I need something shorter..." he insisted. "How about your middle name then?"

"Jean? I suppose it could be worse, but I'd rather you didn't."

"How about Mia?" Ginny asked. "It's not really a part of her name, but it's close."

"Mia," Harry said as if he were tasting it. "Mia, I think I like that."

Thanks, Gin."

"My pleasure," the redhead purred as she snuggled into him a little more.

"All right," Hermione agreed. "It is better than Jean, but only when it's just us."

"Thank you - Mia," Harry said gently and rubbed her back for a moment since his arm was around her. "Thank you to each of you. We'll get through this together." He planted another kiss on the top of each of their heads before he relaxed. They each tried to get a little closer to him and he enjoyed their closeness all the more, letting his problem from earlier leave his thoughts for the night in their comfort.

(A/N: As you can see we're going AU, with a few select "facts" from the books.)

Chapter 23 - Family

Harry slowly swam into consciousness with strange breathing sounds and a wet right ear. Considering it for a second, he decided someone was nibbling on his ear. Opening his eyes slowly, he saw Ginny's hair partially in his face.

"Morning Harry," she breathed directly into his ear, which tickled enough he almost squirmed. Instead, he moved his head to try and get away.

"Time to get up, you slacker," she teased.

"What?" he murmured.

"We haven't done any exercises for several days. I talked to Apolline and she showed me a room we can use and leave all of our stuff set up." Ginny moved the covers enough for her to climb out.

Harry was of two minds about getting up. Most obviously he was warm and comfortable, despite Gabi half laying on him and his left arm being half numb from Hermione laying on it. However, he also knew that exercises did not do themselves and he liked the results of his workouts, as did the girls. They had told him they like his developing muscles, but he liked the power and stamina they gave him when he dueled or had to pick something - or someone - up. "What about them?" he whispered and nodded at the two girls on his left.

"Gabi may join us and Hermione can do what she wants," Ginny casually whispered back. When Harry still did not move, she said, "If you don't come then I'll have to go exercise in my new outfit alone."

"New outfit?" he said softly, almost squeaking while wondering what it might look like.

"Yep," she said with a knowing smile. "Emma gave it to me at Christmas, but I've been waiting for a good time to wear it, as I have enough outfits normally."

Harry lifted his head and looked at the other two girls and started trying to extract himself.

"Stay here, Harry," Hermione sleepily told him.

That was one, he thought with a smile as he pulled his left arm out. He shook the little blonde's shoulder gently. "Gabi, I need to get up." When she only clutched him tighter, he chuckled and carefully rolled her towards Hermione.

With blonde hair going everywhere, Gabrielle looked up at the window and then at him sleepily. «It is early still.»

«Ginny and I are going to exercise. You can come if you want.»

Gabrielle brightened and became completely awake as she brushed the hair out of her face. «What do I wear?»

Ginny chuckled at having another convert. «Come with me and I'll let you wear one of my old outfits. Harry, bring your weights.» She held out her hand and Gabrielle scampered out of bed and grabbed Ginny's hand, leaving the room with the redhead.

Harry crawled out now. "You need to get up, too," he told the last girl.

"I think I'll get an extra hour of sleep," Hermione told him sleepily and with a yawn.

He looked at her and tried to figure out how he was going to change. "Roll over and face the wall," he finally said, deciding that was good enough for now. He was not going to be naked.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him but turned over.

Satisfied, Harry found his work-out clothes. With a quick glance to make sure Hermione was still looking the other way, he turned his back to her as he stripped down to just his boxers and put his shorts and a T-shirt on. Finding some socks, he turned back to the bed to sit on it and saw Hermione's eyes watching him.

"Did you enjoy that?" he asked softly as he put his socks on.

"Yes," she murmured.

"Do I get to do the same to you?"

After a moment, Hermione answered softly. "One day not too far from now ... maybe Christmas, maybe sooner."

"Christmas?" He mock-glared at her. "That's almost a year from now."

"Only about ten months," she corrected him automatically.

"Still..."

"I didn't see any more than what you'd show at the beach in a swim suit," she pointed out. "If you see me in my knickers and a bra, it would be a little more revealing and I don't want to go too fast. I'm afraid we'd get too intimate too quickly."

Harry grabbed his shoes and started putting them on while he considered that. "You do have a point. So swim suits will be the limit for now?"

"I think it would be best. What about you?"

"I suppose that will work." He stood and looked at her. "To be honest,

I'm not sure what I want. I know I don't want to take advantage of any of you as I don't want to hurt anyone, and yet I'm feeling..." He paused and blushed before he said hurriedly, "I have feelings wanting to go forward. My body and my mind aren't quite on the same page, I think."

Hermione softly chuckled. "From what I've read, that's normal for a fourteen-almost-fifteen year old boy - especially with a fifteen-almost-sixteen year old girl."

There was a knock on the door and Gabrielle stuck her head in. "Come."

With a sweet smile, Hermione waved him on. When she was alone, she closed her eyes and let out a satisfied sigh. She let herself drift back to sleep for a short time fantasizing about what it could be like when they were two years older.

«Where's Ginny?» Harry asked as Gabrielle led him towards the classrooms.

"Waiting."

Harry looked at the girl dressed in one of Ginny's old exercise outfits. It was only a little loose on her since it was spandex. It was the usual style with full legs or pants, and the top covered the whole body like a one-piece swimsuit.

Soon, they arrived at the room next to their classroom. As soon as he walked in he stopped dead in his tracks, his eyes going wide. Instead of her normal outfit in the style Gabrielle was wearing, Ginny was there wearing a pale yellow two piece outfit. The top was basically just an exercise bra and the bottoms were spandex shorts stopping just above the knee, leaving a lot of stomach showing.

«I guess you like it?» Ginny asked with a smirk as she started to

stretch.

"Yeah..." He never realized he had slipped back into English.

«This only works for me because I'm small on top.» She grinned before she said, «I will have to give Emma a hug for this. Gabi, come over here and let me show you how to stretch so you don't hurt yourself. I've conjured a extra step for you for you to use until we can get you a real one.»

Harry shook himself out of his daze and set his shrunken weight set down before he started stretching too, being extra careful to look away from Ginny for the moment. He really needed to get all of himself back under control. As he stretched, he considered his thoughts about Gin and re-evaluated them slightly. Gin was not the prettiest girl he had ever seen when he thought only about her looks, but she was definitely cute in her own way and attractive. If he was honest with himself, he had to admit that what he liked most about her was her playful approach to life while still being smart. Her personality made the rest of her shine. However when he saw her like this, he would also say she was growing into a very attractive body - one that his teenage male body could not help but admire.

Ginny turned on the music and showed Gabrielle how to use the steps as they started their cardio exercise. During this time, Harry could not help but sneak peeks at Ginny and at Gabrielle also. Gabrielle was still young and physically uninteresting at the moment, although he did recognize her potential based on her sister and mother. Ginny's movements, however, were poetry in motion he thought.

Harry was surprised when Ginny turned the music off, he was so lost in his own thoughts. Coming back to the present, he helped Ginny show Gabrielle how to do push-ups and other exercises for strength. He noticed that Ginny had already canceled the shrinking spell on their small weight set and he started on that. Ginny and Gabrielle

joined him a few minutes later.

By the time they were done, all of them were sweaty and tired, but it was a good feeling.

«This will make me like you ... so Harry will look at me the same way?» Gabrielle asked Ginny.

Ginny blushed and gave Harry a sly look as she gave the girl a one-armed hug. «It will help. Come, we need to shower before breakfast.» She gave him another quick look over her shoulder before she walked Gabrielle out, an impish grin firmly in place.

Harry groaned softly to himself before he headed towards his room. He was going to be in so much trouble in a few years. Having three pretty girls was probably every teenage boy's dream, but he was starting to realize what that really meant and he was not so sure it was as great as the dream. How was he to keep three girls happy?

Saturday morning, Harry was feeling very nervous. "Grand-ma-ma" and "Grand-pa-pa" were due to arrive soon. He ate breakfast and did his best not to worry, which seemed like a lost cause.

Jean-Aimé came into the room with a small parcel in his hand. «Good-morning!» he called out in a chipper mood. Everyone returned the greeting.

«Harry, I'll give this to you, even though I suspect it's for all of you,» he said as he handed the small box over. «I have checked and it is safe, there are no charms or curses on the contents.»

Harry saw his name on the outside and opened it, ignoring his breakfast and worries for the moment. Inside, he found a number of letters. With a grin, Harry read out loud a small parchment laid on top. "Harry, here's some letters that were sent to me for you and the girls. I'll do this once or twice a week, depending on how many I get.

Sirius." He dug in and pulled out several bundles.

Hermione received a couple of letters. Ginny received nearly a half dozen. Harry's stack looked to have nearly twenty. He also found one for Gabrielle.

"Fleur wrote," Gabrielle said excitedly.

«Mine are from my parents and Luna,» Hermione said, surprised at the second.

«Mine are from Luna and most of my family,» Ginny said as she looked hers over.

«I have one from Neville, Sirius, Remus, Mum and Dad, and I don't recognize any of the rest,» Harry said as he flipped through them.

Jean-Aimé looked at his wife in amusement, a look that was returned. All the children ate quietly as they started reading through the letters.

A few minutes later, the alarm on the Floo warned that someone friendly had come through. «Make yourself presentable and come into the living room,» Apolline directed them all. «You can leave your letters here at the table.»

Harry hurriedly wiped his mouth with his napkin and then tried to smooth his hair down.

Gabrielle giggled at him and held her hand out to him. "Come."

He took a deep breath and walked with her, after Jean-Aimé and Apolline. Hermione and Ginny came last.

In the living stood a woman of stunning beauty and who actually looked old enough to be Fleur's mother. Next to her was a tall well-built man with sandy colored hair that was starting to gray at the

temples. He looked to be in his late fifties, while she looked to be in her late thirties - or so Harry thought.

«Pa-Pa,» Apolline said and hurried over to give the tall man a hug. She then turned and gave her mother a hug as well. «I'm glad you could come.»

«Considering how you asked the most unusual questions the last time we talked, and also said that we had to come, how could we not?»

«Jean-Aimé.»

«Henri.» Jean-Aimé Delacour cordially shook hands with the older man.

Apolline turned and pulled her parents forward. Before she could introduce anyone, her mother surprised her.

«Gabrielle, my little angel, who is holding your hand?» She was giving Harry a very intense look, measuring everything about him.

«Mother, this is ... well, we'll explain in a moment ... but this is Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, and Ginevra Potter. This is my father and mother, Henri and Sabine Morel.»

«Gabrielle?» Henri Morel knelt down on one knee and held his arms out and caught the little girl in a hug when she ran over. He passed the girl to his wife and then stood. After giving Harry a mental measure, he held out his hand. «Mr Potter.»

«It is nice to meet you, Mr Morel.» Harry's nervousness took that moment to return in full force.

As he turned to the man's wife, he felt a force he was familiar with, but the strength of it was unexpected it - he almost took a step

backwards from its power.

«Mr Potter.»

«Mother!»

«Hush, my child.» The Veela turned back to Harry. «Since you were holding my granddaughter's hand, do you feel you are worthy of her?»

Harry pushed the Veela allure away with difficulty. He guessed it was so strong because she was right in front of him and she was a full Veela. «No, Mrs Morel. I doubt there is anyone worthy enough for Gabrielle, but I shall try anyway.» After a few more seconds, he felt the allure reduce to a minimal level.

«At least you have resistance and some wit,» she said neutrally. «I suppose we shall have to see how well you might work out.»

«Mother, you are being rude,» Apolline said with some embarrassment.

«Perhaps, my daughter, but it is best get rid of the bad ones quickly,» Sabine answered with no hint of apology in her voice.

Apolline looked at her father, but he only gave a slightly embarrassed smile and a helpless shrug. «Have a seat; we have much to discuss.»

Harry sat in the middle of the large sofa, with Hermione on his left, Gabrielle on his right, and Ginny on the far right, and all of them touching at the hips they were sitting so closely. Sabine raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow at her daughter.

«Harry, I believe you should go first, then the rest of you in order,» Apolline suggested.

"I have protected this knowledge with a charm, and I can only say it in English. Do you understand?" he asked.

"Perfectly. You are from England," she said, pointing out her understanding of the obvious.

"All three of us are," he said, including Hermione and Ginny with a wave. He looked at Henri and the man nodded.

"Very well." Harry took a deep breath and wished with all of his heart that this worked out. "Harry James Potter is bonded to several witches by the special power known as a Rescue Bond. The bond was created when he saved an unattached witch from dying. Because of this bond, they are my magical wives for the rest of our lives and I will protect them from all others not of our bond."

Sabine gasped and sat up very straight, her hand going to her robes, although she did nothing else for a moment. «You are serious? You have the power of the Rescue Bond?»

Harry felt uneasy with her reaction and slowly started to move his hand towards his side pocket.

«Please wait mother. Hermione?»

"Mine is in English, too. Hermione Jean is magically bonded to Harry James Potter and is his magical wife. They are bound by magic and by love, never to be magically separated. They share magic, knowledge of the other, and will protect each other against all others not of the bond."

Ginny did not hesitate and shared her secret. "Ginevra is magically bonded to Harry James Potter and is his magical wife. They are bound by magic and by love, never to be magically separated as long as they live. They share magic, knowledge of the other, and will

protect each other against all others not of the bond."

As everyone looked at Gabrielle, Ginny whispered to her so she could say, "I, Gabrielle Laure, am magically bonded to Harry James Potter and I am his magical wife. We share magic, knowledge of the other, and will protect each other against all others not of the bond."

«NO! It can't be! Not in my family!» Sabine shouted angrily. Her hand came out of her robes and a fireball started to form in her hand.

Harry's hand shot forward, his wand in his hand. "Protego!" he shouted excitedly before Sabine could cast her fire. Hermione also cast a shield. Ginny flicked her wand to the side and an ottoman jumped up in the air between Harry and the Veela grandmother. Gabrielle simply moved to stand in front of Harry.

Apolline jumped to her feet and stepped forward so she was between her mother and Gabrielle. «Mother, stop!»

Henri reached over and grabbed his wife's arm. The fireball flickered out and he looked relieved.

Sabine glared at her husband and then at her daughter. «Three of them, including your youngest daughter, Apolline,» she said with disappointment dripping in her tone.

«He did not know what it was! And furthermore, if he had not saved them, then all three of them would be dead - including Gabrielle.» Apolline stared at her mother and kept her silent. «I know the Veela have not always had good examples of men with this power, but a few have been recorded in history as good and honorable. Harry has been another good example, and I have not even the smallest reason to complain. I have only known him for a little more than a week, but he is a kind young man and I can not imagine anyone better for my daughter.»

Since it looked like they were safe for the moment, Harry dropped his shield, but kept his wand in hand even if it was directed at the floor. Hermione followed his example. Ginny put the ottoman back, her wand also staying out. Gabrielle move back to her place slowly, looking at her grandmother a little differently now.

When her mother still said nothing, Apolline turned to the children. «This does not excuse my mother, but you must understand that the last documented case of this power was a little under a hundred years ago. At that time, an unsavory wizard found he had the Rescuer Bonding power as he traveled through France, near a Veela colony, and bonded a young Veela - about Gabrielle's age. Once he understood this, he created perilous situations for other unsuspecting young Veela and bonded them as well. The story also ends badly, as his ... greed, caused him to continue until he had bonded six Veela. The sixth one was a fully mature Veela, and she killed him when she transformed during their first mating. While the six mates did not die, they were never fully sane again.»

Harry felt sick upon hearing that. Looking around he could see that his bond-mates looked like they felt the same way. Jean-Aimé and Henri did not look much better, and Harry thought that they probably had not heard that particular story before.

«Do not worry, Harry,» Apolline said gently. «The problems are avoidable and we will help you. All of you should have long and wonderful lives.»

He nodded gratefully. Then another thought occurred to him. "But what about - you know..."

«Yes, we'll get to that in a moment.» Apolline turned to her mother. «I believe you have something very important to say to Harry and his bond-mates ... mother!» She glared at the older Veela.

Sabine looked very uncomfortable. She looked at her husband.

«You caused the offense. You must make it right,» he said in his deep voice, brooking no argument.

Sabine cleared her throat before finally looking directly at Harry. «I apologize for my rudeness and reactions. As Apolline explained, we Veela have not had good experiences with this magical power and that ... makes me biased. I ask your forgiveness and I promise I will do my best to keep an open mind. You are now family and I should act accordingly.»

Harry looked at his girls and received three nods. «We accept your apology.»

«A good choice, Sabine,» Jean-Aimé remarked dryly. «Harry has single-handedly defeated a Mountain Troll, a Basilisk, and an Hungarian-Horntailed Dragon.»

While Sabine gave her son-in-law a glare for him reminding her of her mistake, Henri chuckled, fully understanding that the statement that Harry was a power to reckoned with.

Apolline relaxed and backed into her seat. «Now that we all understand that we are family,» she flicked a glance at her mother, who sat passively and looked a little embarrassed now, «we have a problem we need to solve. This last week, I was teaching Gabrielle to get to know her magic and to learn to control her Veela powers. During this time, she found a magical connection to her bond-mate.»

Sabine started to look intrigued at this, as did her husband.

«I have not heard of this before, but then I've never met a bonded Veela before either.» Apolline gave her mother an inquisitive look.

«I can not say I have either. I would have to research it at the colony,» the woman said softly.

«I did a quick search the other day and did not find anything like this. However, here is where it gets very strange. Gabrielle felt her bond with Harry and found it to be good. But she also felt a sliver of revulsion too - something that was not Harry yet somehow inside Harry.» When no answer was given, she added, «Then I did the bond detection spell and found something I could not explain.»

Sabine continued to look thoughtful. «I assume you would like me to do that as well?»

«It would be helpful to confirm my findings and be a good starting point to determine what to do,» Apolline replied.

Sabine stood and slowly pulled out her wand.

Apolline motioned everyone up. She positioned Harry and the girls in a semi-circle in front of him. When her mother stood in front of Harry, she smiled and moved her to the side next to Gabrielle. «You'll understand in a moment.» She walked over and stood behind Hermione and Ginny. «Now, Mother.»

Harry lifted his wand and pointed it at the older woman's feet, while trying to put on a brave front. The girls were eyeing the woman carefully as well, wands still in hand.

Sabine bowed her head. «I probably deserve that. Again, I am sorry for my reaction earlier. I promise on my honor that I will only cast the bond detection spell.»

He considered it for a moment before nodding and lowering his wand to point it at the floor. The girls followed his example of lowering their wands but keeping them out.

Sabine slowly raised her wand, then with a deft flick of her hand, she cast the bond detection charm. Thick light blue beams shot out from

Harry's body to each of the three girls, and a thin black beam shot out of his forehead through the empty space in front of him and out the window. She gasped and ended the charm.

Walking over to Harry slowly, she tentatively raised her hand to give him time to stop her. When he did not, she gently swept his hair to the side and looked at the scar on his forehead. «I had heard the story, but to see it...» Sabine sighed and looked a little disappointed for a moment. «I have made another error and I am afraid I owe you another apology - Harry. I have heard the story from when you were a baby, as most of the Wizarding world has. I was fearful of Gabrielle being with an egotistical Briton. Yet you have been patient, calm, and reserved the entire time unless provoked, while I have acted like a fool in judging you prematurely. I again ask for your forgiveness; but even if you do not give it, I will help you to the best of my ability.»

Harry considered that. Her reaction was just like many of those in England, and yet she was trying to make it right, unlike all of the others. «Because you are family?»

She smiled. «Because all four of you are family.»

He returned her smile with a grin of his own. «I forgive you because you are family. I have always wanted a grandmother and a grandfather.»

Sabine drew him into a hug, which Harry returned slowly but with more confidence at the end.

Harry looked over her shoulder to see Gabrielle smiling and relaxed, glad that he had accepted her grandmother. Hermione looked mostly relaxed, but it was obvious she was thinking the whole situation through very carefully. Ginny's reaction was the most extreme, still looking somewhat distrustful. He wondered if this reminded her of her mother.

«Young man, tell me about your scar - anything unusual at all,» Sabine asked as she released him.

Harry shrugged when she let him go. «I sometimes get a twinge or dull ache for a few minutes from it, but it's not very often. The worst was a sharp shooting pain during my first Welcoming Feast at school when I was eleven, but that was only one time. The twinges and aches mostly came during one class at school, but when the teacher left during the year, they stopped.»

«Was there anything special about this teacher?»

«Not that I know.» He looked at Hermione since she was there.

«Professor Quirrell?» At his nod, she said, «He was very afraid of Vampires and always had a lot of garlic around him. Maybe you had a reaction to that?»

«Unlikely, but easily testable.» Sabine looked at her daughter who nodded. A moment later, a house-elf had brought a clump of fresh garlic. Even when waved right under his nose, Harry never had a twinge or ache in his scar.

«Now what?» Harry asked.

Sabine walked over to the large window and looked out over the vineyard, thinking carefully about this.

Jean-Aimé called a house-elf and had refreshments served.

After several minutes, Sabine turned back to the group. «I can think of one way to fix this, but I must go research an aspect of it.» At everyone's eager look, she explained the details. «In theory, it is possible to remove one member of a bond and leave the other connections intact.»

Harry heard breaths being sucked in all around him. He would have done the same, but he was just too surprised. He quickly took a sip of his juice. «You can do that ... safely?»

She gave him an understanding smile. «That is what I must research. I will not do it if I cannot leave the four of you together. The most common answer to your problem would be to do an exorcism, but that would almost certainly break the bonds to all of your bond-mates, and probably cause problems no one wants.»

«Like insanity?» Hermione asked fearfully in a whisper.

«That is one possible outcome for the one who is cast out. Rest assured that it is not easy to break a bond.» Sabine paused for a moment, looking a little sadly at each of the four. «I fear you are too young to truly understand this, but I will tell you anyway. You should also know that when Harry dies, it is probable that all of you will die soon after. I am very sorry, but you should know.»

«You said that if someone is cast out of a bond, that they can go insane. Would that be true if you can break this extra bond to Harry? And what would happen to Harry?» Hermione asked carefully, casting worried glances at Harry. Ginny and Gabrielle also looked worried at the question.

«I do not expect any problems at all for Harry with this because it is not the same type of bond that you have with him, so do not worry for him.» All three girls, and Harry too, relaxed slightly. «As for who is on the other end...» Sabine looked concerned. «Would it be safe to assume the connection is to Lord Voldemort?»

«I believe so,» Harry said in a steadier voice than he had expected.

Sabine nodded and looked thoughtful for a moment. «Since it is really more a magical connection than a bond, I don't believe it will do anything to him. We can use the various bond spells to help us

though, such as the one we've already used.»

In the silence after the explanation, Jean-Aimé cleared his throat quietly. «I think Henri should join Harry and I for a leisurely walk to the vaults to find a good wine for lunch. You ladies can enjoy some time together until lunch. After lunch we can tell stories and get to know one another better, yes?»

«A wonderful idea, my husband,» Apolline agreed vigorously. «Harry, go get to know your new grandfather and maybe even show him some of your flying. He used to be Chaser on the school team many years ago.»

«Apolline, it was not that many years ago,» Henri protested teasingly.

At the end of the day, Harry hugged Grand-ma-ma and had enjoyed her visit during the afternoon, despite the rough start in the morning. He thought his new grandfather was pretty awesome as well.

Just before bedtime, the four bond-mates sat on Harry's bed and read through the rest of the letters they had received that morning.

Harry gave over half of his letters to Hermione to look through. She shared them with Gabrielle to help with her written English. All of those letters were either letters from friends wishing him well, plus a few from total strangers telling him off for leaving Hogwarts. They Vanished all of the "bad ones."

They found that Dan and Emma planned to come visit them next weekend. Everyone else that he knew said "hi." Neville's was amusing, especially when he described Dumbledore's reaction when the Daily Prophet article came out about Harry leaving school. Harry was already planning what he would write to Neville about.

A sob from Ginny caused everyone to look her way, and when Harry saw the tears start to go down her face, he moved over and pulled

her into a hug. "What's wrong?"

Ginny dropped her letter on the bed in front of Hermione and cried on Harry's shoulder for a few moments.

Harry looked at Hermione as she read the letter silently, with growing concern the further she went. She was not looking happy by the time she reached the end.

"Do you want me to share, Ginny?" Hermione asked as gently as she could. Ginny nodded while she continued to cling to Harry.

"Uh, things aren't going well for Mr Weasley at the moment. He and Mrs Weasley aren't talking most of the time, and when they are, they're having arguments. He's sleeping in Percy's old room at the moment..."

"It's never been that bad before," Ginny managed through her sniffles.

"Err... Apparently Mrs Weasley is blaming him for losing Ginny, but he says that Ginny is not the cause of this, that it's been a long time coming. He also says that they will work through it and not to worry, but he wanted Ginny to know in case any rumors reached her. He also says he doesn't regret anything and hopes Ginny is happy. He wishes all of us well." Hermione put the letter back in front of Ginny, who was now quietly clinging to Harry.

Gabrielle reached over and rubbed Ginny's back. «Sleep with us, Ginny. All of us together like last night.»

«Thank you, Gabi.» Ginny looked up with very red eyes and gave the little girl a hug.

Harry could not deny her. "We're here for you, Ginny."

Ginny stretched up a few inches and kissed Harry hard, regardless of the other two present. It was not something they normally did, but they all understood her need.

When the kiss ended, Harry looked down at Gabi. «Help her get changed.» The little blonde smiled and pulled Ginny up. Hermione got up and left as well.

Harry quickly changed and picked up his clothes to put in the dirty basket.

«What is wrong, Harry? I heard crying from down the hall.»

Looking up, he saw Apolline in the doorway. «Ginny received a letter from home. Her father and mother are fighting and it sounds bad. »

Apolline nodded. «From what I saw, I am not surprised, although that does not make the hurt any less.» Hearing a noise behind her, she turned and saw the three girls dressed in their pyjamas. Ginny still had red eyes. Sighing, she motioned them in. «For tonight, but please don't make a habit of this right now. Jean-Aimé still has not completely accepted all parts of this.»

The girls all hurried into Harry's room. Gabrielle stopped as she passed her mother and gave her a hug. «Thank you, and I love you.»

Hurrying into the room, she pulled the covers back and directed Hermione into the bed first and got her to lay on her side. Harry went in next, his back to Hermione. Ginny was pushed in and then Gabrielle crawled in last, all of them on their sides and facing the same way. «This way, Ginny has someone to hold and someone to hold her.»

Apolline shook her head slightly in amusement at her daughter's antics and turned off the light. «Sleep well.»

When they were alone, Ginny pulled Gabi to her a little like a squeeze. «Thank you, Gabi.» She felt Harry's arm over her and Gabi and she felt safe, leaving only a small ache in her heart for her father.

"I love you, Ginny." Harry whispered, "and don't get up early. It's been a long day."

"Here, here," Hermione softly said, causing a chuckle and two giggles.

"Thank you all, you're the best family a girl could have," Ginny told them before she drifted off to sleep.

They met a new teacher on Monday morning. In their classroom, Apolline introduced their Defense teacher.

«This is Mr Martin and he will be your Defense teacher. Harry, you mentioned that you thought this would be your most important class; therefore, he will have the entire morning every Monday. He is a retired French Auror and is now an independent security specialist.»

Harry looked the man over during the introduction. He appeared to be about approximately forty and was only a few inches taller than Harry, although he was much stockier. He did not look fat, but rather it seemed the man was all muscle. His face was very average and did not look unusual in any way, not even any scars. It was the sort of face you could easily forget. His hair was short and dark, while his eyes were hazel and intense. The man also did not wear normal wizarding robes, but was dressed much like their former Professor Snape. His trousers and top were black and he wore a short cape that went only a little past his waist. Harry thought the cape looked like it was barely attached and like it could be easily removed.

«Mr Potter.» Martin held out his beefy hand and shook Harry's. He turned to the girls and greeted them by name, giving each a short bow, causing smiles and suppressed giggles.

«Mrs Delacour has given me some of your background as well as your needs. While teaching young students is not one of my normal tasks, this intrigued me enough that I was willing to give it a try for a few months to see how it worked out. Please have a seat and tell me about your past lessons in this area and what you would like me to teach you.» Martin took a seat as well and gave them his complete attention.

Harry noticed that Apolline had already left, so he made himself comfortable in a chair, as did his girls. The three of them spent the next half-hour describing their experiences at Hogwarts, and the fact the two of their four teachers had not been very good. Harry also described his battles with a Troll, Basilisk, and Dementor as well as his two tasks in the present Tournament. During this time, Martin asked a few questions to clarify the situation, but he mostly just listened.

«So,» Harry said as he started to wrap it all up, «what I think we need is to finish our fourth year studies so we can enter fifth year next year, and learn any other necessary skills to allow us to be able to defend ourselves, since have had to do that in the past. My godfather has also taught us a few things to help out, like the Blasting hex, Disillusionment charm, and conjuring. There are probably a lot of things to left to learn, but beyond the material for our exams at school, I'd like to stay more practical.»

Professor Martin nodded and looked thoughtful. He looked at Ginny. «Miss Potter, as I understand it, you are a year behind them?»

«Yes, Professor,» the redhead answered. «However, I've tried to study ahead with my friends and I'd like to learn the same material. If Headmistress Maxime will let me, I'd like to move up a year when we start classes next fall.»

«So you are requesting that I treat you as a fourth year as well?» he

clarified.

«Yes, Professor.»

He nodded. «May I see one of your fourth year textbooks?» Hermione handed the standard Hogwarts text over and he looked at it for a few minutes before handing it back. «If you are to attend Beauxbatons next year, don't you feel it would be a good idea to be using one of their books?» he asked lightly.

«Yes, Professor,» Hermione answered quickly. «However, we've yet to have a chance to get them. I'm hoping we can do that this coming weekend.»

«Very well. Then we will not consider your class work until next time. For today, let's see what you know and, as Mr Potter has requested, what you can do. That will allow me to understand where you are magically, as well as how you fight, including tactics. Notice I did not say dueling. If you want to go on the Dueling Circuit and have sport there, feel free; but you requested to learn how to protect yourselves and that requires fighting. We will begin with one at a time, starting with Miss Potter, then Miss Granger, and finally with Mr Potter. After that, it will be all three of you against me. Please be careful with the hexes not to make them too damaging.» He looked at Ginny as he shrugged off his cape with a practiced ease. «You first, Miss Potter.»

Harry and Hermione had moved to the side of the room and Professor Martin had coated the walls and floor with a spell that turned them a greenish-blue. He had said it was to protect them from damage and to cushion them slightly. Harry thought he might have felt a little give when he jumped up and down, so the cushion was very slight.

Watching the two spar, it was obvious the man, while taking Ginny seriously, was not having to try very hard to win. He dodged mostly, but he also batted away many spells Ginny threw at him. He cast a

few spells at her, but mostly he stayed on defense. After a few minutes, he appeared to grow tired of the game and moved to offense. Ginny put up a good shield, Harry even felt a slight pull on his magic when she cast it, but in the end, Martin out maneuvered her, broke her shield down, and stunned her. He was not even breathing hard.

Martin walked over to the prone Ginny and revived her and helped her to her feet. «It has been a few years since I was in fourth year,» he said with an easy smile, «but I believe that would be a good place for you now. I see the occasional glimpse of inspiration in your fighting, which I will try to bring out and hone. Please have a seat next to Mr Potter. Miss Granger?»

Hermione looked nervous, but she pulled her wand out and walked into the middle of the room. She was barely set when Martin fired the first spell at her. The fight between the two was much like the one with Ginny. Martin stayed with strictly defense and evaluated her for a few minutes before he ended the exam, much more quickly than with Ginny.

When she was revived and on her feet, Martin looked at her thoughtfully. «You thought to try different spells when your previous ones did not work was well reasoned; however, your style lacked aggressiveness. If you are to truly protect yourself and others, you must not hold back, Miss Granger.»

«I didn't want to hurt you, Professor.»

He gave her a broader smile. «Unlikely, although I do appreciate your concern. Mr Potter, it is your turn.»

Harry took a deep breath and pulled his wand before walking out. «Before we start, Professor, can you teach me the trick to batting a spell away?»

The man grinned almost evilly. «I'm sorry, Mr Potter, but it is not time for that kind of instruction yet. You will have to make do with what you know for now.» A brown spell that looked like cutting charm suddenly flew out of the man's wand at Harry's right knee. Since Ginny and Hermione had used a few silent spells, the man assumed that Harry must know them too and used one on him as a sneak attack.

Harry moved right a little let the spell go between his legs and shot a modified water spell at the man. This was not the sort that you used to fill your glass, but it created a high-pressure stream of water.

Martin looked surprised, but shifted his weight to take the spell in the chest and shot a Bludgeoning hex at Harry.

Harry dived left, but he started a spell as he was moving. He was facing Martin again as he finished the spell and was gratified that he saw the wet area under his opponent turn whitish and solid.

With a grin, Martin waved his wand down and sand spewed out to give him some traction. Harry used the few precious seconds to rise from his knees to his feet. Harry shot a Banishing charm at the man and the fight resumed.

Martin stayed mostly on the defensive, but Harry made him work for it. Neither of them stood still, each doing a lot of dodging. When Martin started throwing more offensive spells, Harry knew he was going to be pushed and so he stepped up his power, pushing a little extra into each spell. His shield held steady when he used one. The Professor finally used a shield for the first time when Harry launched the Arrow spell at his hip. As the Frenchman's shield caused the arrow to ricochet to the side, Harry let a powerful Blasting hex go, aimed at the man's knees - just in case the shield failed.

To everyone's surprise, Martin's especially, the Blasting hex took the Professor's shield down, although he was not hurt. A Piercing hex shot at Harry's shins took his shield down and a quick Confundus

charm as a follow up hit Harry in the shoulder. After that, a Stunning spell easily ended the match.

When Harry was revived, he saw a smiling and heavily breathing Martin standing over him with an extended hand. Harry took it and was pulled up.

«Very well done, Mr Potter. You surprised me several times and I am very pleased. You have a good foundation to build upon. When I was in school, many sixth years would be happy to have fought as well as you did just then. Yes, very well done; this is certainly a strength for you.»

Harry bashfully smiled at his girls, who were each giving him very proud smiles in return.

«Before we try the three against one fight, I shall address one other issue to allow me to get my breath back.» He gave Harry another respectful look. «Knowledge of fighting and what you're fighting against is important, but it is just as important to be able to continue a fight, and that means physical fitness. You did very well, Mr Potter, as did you Miss Potter.» He gave Hermione a penetrating look. «Miss Granger, you barely moved at all and easily lost your breath. It is not hard for me to know that these two exercise and you do not. If you expect to do well in this class, you will change that now. As they appear to have a working physical fitness program, you can work with them. Or if you prefer, I can create one for you.»

Hermione seemed to wilt as she looked down. After a moment, she quietly said, «I'll start exercising with Harry and Ginny.»

«Good choice, Miss Granger. Now, I believe I'm sufficiently rested to continue and you look to be breathing normally as well, Mr Potter, so let us begin.» He stepped back and raised his wand.

The girls came over to join Harry, until he quickly said, «Don't stand

near someone else, so he can't get two of us with one spell.»

As the girls spread a little, Martin grinned. «Simple but good tactics, Mr Potter.» While he was looking at Harry, he silently cast a spell at Hermione and the fight was on. It took nearly fifteen minutes, with Hermione going down first and Harry last, but Martin was the victor in the end.

Despite his heaving breathing, he heard clapping and spun with wand up. In the open doorway, he saw his host and her youngest daughter. Only the mother was clapping; the daughter was looking at him angrily.

«He's hurt,» Gabrielle said before she ran over to Harry, looking him over for injury.

«He will be fine, my daughter,» her mother assured her confidently. Gabrielle did not look like she believed that.

«How goes the testing?» Apolline asked the Professor.

«Fortunately, it is finished for the day. I believe the rest of the time will be spent in relatively easy instruction.» He waved his wand over his leg and began to smile a little more naturally. «Mr Potter is quite talented in this area and I look forward to teaching him. Miss Potter and Miss Granger should also prove to be interesting, although they are not as powerful nor as gifted in this.»

«He won't wake up, Mother!» Gabrielle cried as she continued to shake his shoulder.

Apolline drew her wand and sent a reviving charm over.

Harry's eyes instantly flew open. His drive to fight immediately quelled when he saw a very worried Gabrielle looking down at him. «I'm fine.»

«You're hurt,» she insisted with a small pout.

«I was stunned.» At her insistent look, he added, «I probably have a few bruises from when I fell, but there's nothing seriously wrong with me.» That seemed to comfort the little girl.

Harry got up and checked on Hermione and then Ginny, reviving each. Apolline sped up the healing of their bruises with a special charm, which Harry thought they needed to learn.

When they had recovered, Professor Martin addressed them. «For a group of untrained fourth years, you did very well. Over the next few months, I shall help you learn more about small group tactics.»

«Me too!» Gabrielle insisted.

While everyone grinned at her, upsetting her because she was not being taken seriously, Harry suddenly said, «Actually, I think it would be good for her to learn too.» At Apolline's dark look to that, Harry explained, «I'm not saying I want her fighting, but I know she'll be around us a lot and I think she should learn what to do, even if she can't magically cast the spells yet. One day she will be able to, and in the meantime, we can also learn how to protect someone who isn't fighting with us.»

Martin gave a look that indicated he did not seem to care and turned to the mother.

Apolline looked between all of "her children" as she considered them. After a moment, she finally said, «Only if I can sit in on those lessons.» Gabrielle squealed in her delight and gave her mother a hug. «Don't make me regret this,» she told them, including the teacher in her glances.

Professor Martin acknowledged her with a casual nod. «Let's look at

a few new things for the rest of our time. How about shields and battling spells away?» he asked with a knowing look at Harry. Harry looked enthusiastic, and Hermione and Ginny were only slightly less so.

That evening, they had a little extra time before dinner. Hermione weaved her fingers into Harry's hand, causing him to smile at her. She tugged on his arm and pulled him towards the back balcony.

Gabrielle looked up from across the room and watched them go out.

Ginny also saw them go and the look on the little blonde's face. «Let them go, they need some time alone.» She returned to finishing up her homework.

«I wouldn't stop them, but I am wondering what they're talking about.»

Ginny almost said they probably were not talking, until she looked up again and saw that the two out back were standing arm in arm, but it was obvious they were having a serious talk about something and not kissing like she had expected. «If it's important, I'm sure they'll tell us. Back to your book so you can finish before dinner,» she said, tapping her finger on the book. With a smile, she watched the little blonde return to her homework. Ginny got a warm feeling in her heart as she thought about it. Not only did she have an "older sister", but she had a "younger sister" too, and she enjoyed each of them.

On the back balcony, Hermione led Harry to the rail and turned him so he leaning against it and was facing her. She stepped in between his legs and put her arms around his neck, leaving them fully extended so they could see each other's face as they talked. She felt his arms go to her waist and hold her securely; it all felt very pleasant.

"Harry, there's something I want to talk to you about," she said in

English, because she wanted to be sure there was no misunderstanding.

"All right," he said easily, enjoying the moment.

Her hint of nervousness came out as she sucked in her bottom lip for a moment. "Harry, I'm not sure I want to go to Beauxbatons next year."

His posture immediately stiffened. "Are you saying you want to return to Hogwarts?"

"No! Definitely not!" she returned without hesitation. "I'm trying to say that I like it here. I like what we have here. I like our independent study and our tutors. Even going to Professor Laurent's home to work in her greenhouses and then potion lab was enjoyable. I'm sure our first Astronomy class with Apolline tonight will go well. I like all of our teachers and they all seem to be good teachers. We can learn more and learn it faster here. We're in a safe place where we don't have to worry about people finding out about our bond either. And no having to hide, no rumors to fight, no questioning looks from other students, and especially no troublesome Headmaster."

Harry chuckled for a moment at the last part. "Yes, definitely no troublesome Headmaster here." He reached up to the left side of her face and pulled some hair back behind her ear. "And you forgot to mention that there are only three pretty girls here for me to deal with, and we don't have to worry about other boys trying to get to you," he said with a grin.

"Or other girls to try to get to you," she said in the same teasing manner.

"You raise good points, but you also forget that this is not our house and the arrangement was only until next fall."

"I didn't forget, but I had hoped we could talk Jean-Aimé and Apolline into letting us stay. I thought they would with Gabrielle still here."

He considered it. "Probably, but we should still ask. You'll also forgetting that it's hard to make new friends here as we're the only ones, and I'm sure the school has a fantastically large library waiting for you to read through," he said with a grin.

She chuckled now. "No, I hadn't forgotten the library we saw on our tour there."

"And Beauxbatons may not have as many rumors about us. Surely The-Boy-Who-Lived crap won't be as bad there."

"Language Harry," she said reflexively before she turned thoughtful. "No, probably not, but there will be other rumors, as we'll probably have to tell them our secrets to explain our actions. If we go to school there, I want us to have our own suite of rooms." She started to turn a little red. "I really like simply sleeping with you, Harry, and I'd like to continue that. Apolline will let us do it some, but not all the time. Still, there are no rumors here when we spend the night together."

Harry laughed and Hermione looked a little hurt. "Mia," he called softly, causing her to instantly look at him because he used his special name for her. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings by laughing. I found it funny because I was thinking 'Now the real truth comes out, she wants to sleep with me'."

Hermione stared at him for a moment before a grin came over her and she chuckled too. "I can see how that would be funny." She sighed and became more serious again. "There are some good reasons to go to school, but to me, there are more and better reasons to stay here to learn."

He considered that and her. "I can see your points, but this is not something for me or for you and me to decide alone. All four of us

would need to agree."

"And if two of us want it and two don't?"

"Then I suppose as head of our house that I'll have to make the final decision, but it will be based on what's best for the family, not just what one person wants or even what I want."

"What do you want, Harry?" she asked, sucking in her lip again, hoping his answer matched hers.

"I like the good points you brought up about staying, but I really don't know. I would like to have a few friends who are male as I miss talking with Neville. I also miss flying on a Quidditch team, too."

She nodded. "Please say you'll think about it, think hard about it?" When he nodded, she knew it would not get any better at the moment. "Thank you," she told him sincerely and leaned in and kissed him, which he eagerly returned.

They kissed for a few more minutes until they heard the door open. Looking over, they saw Gabrielle there grinning at them. "Mother says ... dinner ready."

Feeling a little better about it all, Hermione stepped back and led Harry into dinner.

During dinner, they talked about Professor Martin's class and about the Astronomy lesson Apolline would teach that evening from ten until midnight. They were allowed to sleep in a little tomorrow and then she would also give them a theoretical-only lesson for Care of Magical Creatures.

After dinner, Harry excused them from time with Jean-Aimé and Apolline, saying they needed to talk before their class this evening. The adults did not seem to mind and let them go.

Harry grabbed Hermione's hand and led them to his room. He privately enjoyed the curious looks Gin and Gabi were giving him. He led them to the bed and they all climbed up and grabbed a pillow to get comfortable.

He decided to jump straight to the issue. "Hermione asked me a question today that I think affects all of us. Do we really want to go to Beauxbatons in the fall or should we ask Jean-Aimé and Apolline if we can stay here and continue our studies by ourselves?"

"No," Gabi quickly said. «I want to leave home and go to school.»

"Why?" Hermione asked.

«Because I want to grow up and not be around my parents all the time. I want to make other friends, too, like your Luna and Neville.»

When Gabi stopped talking, Harry said, «Those are good reasons for going. Ginny, what do you think?»

Ginny looked at her hands and tapped her fingertips together for a moment. «I guess I can see both sides, but I think I'd prefer to go to Beauxbatons. After I finish school, I'd like to try to play professional Quidditch. To do that, I need to play on a school team.» She looked up and saw disappointment on Hermione's face. «I assume you want to stay here, Hermione?» The girl nodded. «How about you, Harry?»

Harry sighed. «I can see both sides, too. Hermione pointed out that we can learn more studies faster with private tutors. We could avoid rumors and people making fun of us if we stayed here and continued to use the tutors. That's very tempting. But as much as I like it here, I also want to be around other people too.»

No one said anything for a long moment.

«So now what?» Hermione asked, looking at Harry.

He looked at each of the girls, who in turn were looking at him. «I think we each need to consider this more. It's only early March, so we have plenty of time to decide.»

«Thank you for bringing it up, Harry,» Hermione told him.

«Sure.» He looked at Ginny. «So you're thinking about professional Quidditch?»

«Yes,» she said with a big grin, which he returned.

He turned to Hermione. «What are you thinking about doing after school?»

«I'm not sure yet,» Hermione replied. «I know Mr Croaker says I should to talk to him about a job, but I don't know if that's what I want to do yet. I'm not sure about working for the Ministry. What about you, Harry?»

With a shrug he said, «Don't know yet. Maybe I'll be Ginny's agent.» He winked at the redhead and she giggled. «Maybe I'll work with Sirius to try and clean out the Ministry so you want to work there. I really don't know.» He looked at Gabi.

«I want to be with you, Harry,» the blonde said with a big smile.

Harry laughed and pulled her over and gave her a hug, which she very happily returned.

The four talked until Apolline came to get them at ten for their Astronomy lesson. Hermione proved prophetic and did enjoy the lesson, as did the others. Gabrielle fell asleep during the lesson, but no one minded as the lessons were not for her yet.

Harry woke up alone the next morning. He decided it was probably for the best, but it made him realize he did like to have a sleeping partner to help keep him warm ... and snuggly. He wondered if that was because he was trying to make up having no companionship and love growing up.

Hermione joined them all for morning exercise for the first time. She grumbled a little, but did start to work out with them. She also took it easier than they did so that she could build up her endurance.

Classes continued as did their normal routine until Thursday afternoon and Grand-ma-ma Sabine come out of the Floo. Gabrielle ran over and gave her a hug. Though shy, the others eventually did as well.

«What brings you here, Grand-ma-ma? Do you know how to help Harry?» Gabrielle asked.

The older woman laughed and gently brushed her hand over her granddaughter's head. «I do have an idea, but I need to talk with you. Shall we sit?»

As they were making themselves comfortable, Apolline came into the room. «Hello, Mother. I thought I heard the Floo signal sound.»

«Have a seat dear, you'll probably want to hear this too.» Sabine looked at Harry. «Gabrielle has said that she can sense the connection between you two. I believe that she is sensing your magic because of her Veela nature. That ability is documented in our lore. Are you able to sense Gabrielle or any of the girls in any way, no matter how simple?»

Harry looked at his girls with a questioning look.

«I trust her,» Gabrielle said first.

«I think we have to tell her, Harry. We have to fix this,» Hermione told him.

He looked to Ginny, who was deep in thought. «Honestly, I'd prefer not to, but I don't think we have a choice.» She looked at the older woman. «If we tell you, will you please keep it to yourself?» Hermione agreed vigorously to the condition.

«If you wish, although it could help others if we document it,» Sabine pointed out.

Hermione looked torn and Harry understood. «If it was documented, could that be held until later, much later?» he asked. «As you can tell, we do have a connection we know about, but it gives us an advantage we don't want others to know about as it might be used against us.»

«It could be documented and then sealed until you are ready, even until after you are gone if you so desire,» Sabine admitted.

Harry looked at Hermione, who considered how to answer. «I'll agree to that. After we are gone, it can no longer be used against us in some way. Not that I know how it could be used against us now, but I don't want to find out the hard way that it could be.»

«Well said,» Ginny agreed. Harry and Gabrielle also agreed.

«Very well, I agree too,» the grandmother said. «Now, please describe the connection you have and how you can sense it.»

Harry took a deep breath and slowly let it out. «Our connection is magical and that's how I can feel the others and they can feel me. When I need to, I can pull some magic from them, probably all of them if I have to. It's not a lot, but it's enough to allow me to do the spells that take more power than I naturally have.»

«Similarly,» Hermione took up the explanation, «each of us can pull a little power from Harry. We can use it do spells, and we also found out that we can use it to mimic his magical signature.»

«Amazing,» Sabine whispered.

Apolline had a look of sudden understanding. «That's how you fought so well against Professor Martin.»

Harry looked a little embarrassed, but he nodded. «I can't match his experience or knowledge in a number of ways, but I could overpower my spells to try to make up for the difference between us. That allowed me to break his shield, for example.»

«Can you pull power from each other, or only from Harry?» Sabine asked Hermione.

«Only from Harry,» the brunette replied. Each of the other girls nodded in agreement.

Sabine considered that. «It may work then,» she mumbled. She sat up straighter and looked at the children. «Harry, I need you to concentrate very hard and try to pull magic from all of the girls at the same time. It doesn't have to be much, but I need you to activate the connection to all of them.»

«Err, all right.» Harry closed his eyes and started thinking about each girl and pulling power from her.

While he was doing that, Sabine cast the bond detection spell. Everyone but Harry saw the light blue lines between him and girls thicken slightly - first to Hermione, then to Ginny. When he added in Gabrielle, the lines to Hermione and Ginny thinned back to normal. He slumped, realizing what had happened.

Sabine did her best to give him an encouraging smile. «I'm not

surprised it's hard. I think I would have a hard time doing it too.» He gave her a grateful smile back. «Please don't overtire yourself, but practice this until you can do it and hold it for at least a full minute. When you can, have Apolline let me know and I'll come back. There is a ritual I can do to break a bond, and if you can activate your links to the girls, then the bond that will break will be the inactive one.»

«The one in my curse scar,» he said enthusiastically.

«Yes.» She rose to leave, but stopped before she did. «I don't know if it will help, but you might consider also thinking about how you feel for each one as you try to activate the connection. There are times that emotion gets in the way, but there are also times when it helps.»

«It helps in casting the Patronus charm,» Hermione supplied helpfully, «and we pull magic from each other when we cast that.»

«You can cast that at your age?» Sabine asked incredulously.

«Harry, Ginny, and I can,» Hermione said proudly.

«You are all full of surprises. Very well, that is another possibility. If all else fails, try casting something that requires emotion like the Patronus charm and try to pull magic from all of the girls at the same time while doing so. Good luck and I hope to hear from you soon.» Grand-ma-ma smiled at each of them and then left via the Floo network.

«You can really do a Patronus charm?» Apolline asked just as incredulous as her mother had.

With a grin, Harry pulled out his wand and thought about waking up with three girls snuggled around him. "Expecto Patronum!" To the surprise of three of them, a stag did not come out of Harry's wand, but rather a Hippogriff.

«Impressive,» Apolline told him with a smile.

«And wrong,» Harry said and looked at his wand as if it had betrayed him.

«Wrong?»

«Yes. I've always had a stag before,» he explained to her.

«They can change if you change or what's important to you changes,» Apolline reminded him.

Harry considered that. Thinking carefully about Ginny and what she had told him when he first learned this charm, he cast it again. This time, he got his stag.

«What did you do differently?» Hermione asked very curiously.

He blushed and looked at her. «I was thinking about when I first learned it.» Ginny chuckled and he refused to look at her, lest his blush deepen.

«Try something else, Harry,» Hermione encouraged him.

Shrugging, he thought about snuggling with Hermione and Ginny and cast the charm. The Hippogriff came back out, looked around for a moment and then disappeared.

Ginny looked at him for a moment and then came over whispered directly into his ear. "Think about only Gabi and cast it."

Deciding to play along, Harry thought about the little Veela, how cute and energetic she was. Concentrating on her, he cast the spell. His stag came out.

«Now think of only Gabi and me, that we're each lying in bed with

you and kissing your cheek,» Ginny whispered.

Harry was glad no one else could hear her. He was sure his face was beet red. Nevertheless, he did his best to think of the picture Ginny had given him. When he cast the charm, a Hippogriff came out.

«Ooh, well reasoned, Ginny. What he gets depends on what he thinks about,» Hermione guessed. Ginny nodded her agreement and sat back down.

«I suppose so,» Harry agreed.

Hermione looked excited. «So when you can think of all of us at once, you'll get a different animal still and be able to maintain the link to all of us.»

«That's what I was wondering,» Ginny said.

He had two hours until dinner. Harry used the rest of the afternoon to think about his girls, trying for all three at once and then casting his Patronus charm. By the time dinner came, he was exhausted. After dinner, he joined the others in the living room. He cuddled with Gabrielle, or rather let her cuddle with him. She was ecstatic and Harry enjoyed doing nothing but hold and talk to her, and fell asleep earlier than usual.

The next morning, Harry felt rested again. At breakfast, each of the girls came by and gave him a kiss on the cheek, which he found quite pleasant. However, that also gave him a new idea. «Come with me, I have an idea,» he told them. All three followed him to their classroom. Professor Legrand was not due for another half hour.

Harry pulled off his outer robes and his T-shirt, leaving him topless.

«I like this,» Gabrielle said quickly.

«I do too,» Ginny said appreciatively.

"Mmm-hmm," Hermione joined in.

"Stop it," Harry admonished them. "I have a reason for this. All of you, put both hands on my back and think about pushing your magic into me." He pulled his wand out and gave them a moment. He felt six hands on his back and a little more energetic. Doing his best to think of all three girls as they were right now, touching him, all of them "one", he cast "Expecto Patronum!" A good-sized blob of mist was formed, one that would have a long tail when it became corporeal.

«Again, Harry,» Ginny encouraged him. The other two echoed her.

Thinking about each of the pairs of hands on him, each witch in contact with him, thinking of all of them as one person with four facets, he cast the charm again. This time he saw his Patronus take shape and he heard multiple gasps. Prowling around the room was an animal with the head of lion, the body of a goat, and a tail of a dragon.

"Holy Merlin! A Chimaera!" Ginny shouted as the protector disappeared.

"You did it, Harry!" Hermione spun him around and kissed him hard.

When she let go, Ginny kissed him hard too. When she let go, Gabrielle reached up to pull him down to her, but Harry moved over slightly and just gave her a hug. "No fair!" the little blonde told him fiercely with a scowl.

"No kisses like that until you're thirteen, Gabi," Harry reminded her, although he did try to do it gently.

He suddenly heard footsteps coming. Realizing his state of undress, he hurriedly grabbed his T-shirt. Hermione took his wand to help out.

He barely got his shirt on when Professor Legrand walked into the classroom. He looked at them three of them, with Ginny holding Harry's outer robes.

«I was just stretching and my robes got in the way,» Harry lied, hoping that came across as the truth. «Professor Martin usually has us take them off when we duel.» That was true.

Legrand did not seem to mind. «I don't think we'll be that active today, but whether you wear them or not is up to you, Mr Potter - as long as you're sufficiently dressed without them, of course. Now today, we're going to discuss and then try Transfiguration on inanimate to animate. Who can tell me the limitations that we will run into?»

The lesson started, but half of Harry's mind was not on it, but rather on what he had just done. It was not lost on him what Patronus, or the make-up of each Patronus, he created when he thought of the various combinations of the girls.

Friday evening, Harry and the girls sat together in the living room reading letters again. Another box from Sirius had shown up that morning just before classes and they had not yet have time to read them.

«Listen to Neville's,» Harry called out. «He says that school has really changed since we're not there. It's would be boring if it wasn't for the students from the other two schools, and even they aren't seen much since they are all seventh years. He also says that Malfoy has mostly left them all alone and has been very quiet, unlike his usual self. Angelina is still angry at us, because they lost their game to Hufflepuff. They got a second-year as Seeker, but Cedric beat him to the Snitch.»

«Luna says it's been boring too, but she blames it on an infestation of Ghost-Mice,» Ginny said with a giggle.

"What is ... are ... Ghost-Mice?" Gabrielle asked with a scrunched up face as she tried to figure out which verb to use.

«Only Luna could explain that,» Hermione blithely said as she opened a letter from her parents. «Oh, our parents will be here tomorrow!» She looked at Apolline, who smiled back over her magazine knowingly.

«Yes, they will go with us to Magic Street in Paris. I thought they might like join us, so I went to Jean-Aimé's office and I invited them by phone.»

«Thank you,» Hermione told her with a big smile, which Harry copied.

The Floo signal went off, stopping all other conversation. The fire flared green and the Morels came out.

«Grand-ma-ma! Grand-pa-pa!» Gabrielle shouted as she rushed over to hug each. The others got up and greeted the visitors.

«Who owns the pretty white owl?» Sabine asked.

«Hedwig is mine, although I think she may own me as much as I own her,» Harry said with slight blush, causing giggles from his girls.

«I understand,» the woman said caringly. «Her note said that you were ready for me. Could you give a short demonstration while I cast the Bond Detection spell?»

Harry stood and held out his left arm, mostly bare because of his short-sleeved T-shirt. Each girl grabbed his bare arm with both hands as he drew his wand. As he concentrated, Sabine cast her spell and then he cast "Expecto Patronum!" The image of a Chimaera came out of his wand and the short lines to each of the three girls thickened. After a moment, he let the spell go and his protector faded away. «I

can hold that for almost two minutes.»

«Very good. And when you do that, are you thinking of the three girls?»

«Yes ... Grand-ma-ma,» he answered a little hesitantly, having never called her that before.

She gave him a big smile and patted him on his shoulder. «You all can call me that if you want. I find it pleasant.»

«And you may call me Grand-pa-pa, all three of you,» the older man said with a caring smile to the Brits.

«What do we have to do to fix Harry?» Gabrielle asked excitedly.

«First, all of you go get your pyjamas on. Harry will be exhausted, but all of you will want to sleep after we do this. Go on,» Sabine shooed them out and they ran off.

«Are you very sure about this Mother?» Apolline asked worriedly.

«I would not offer if I wasn't. Surely you know that.» The rebuke was light but present. When her daughter hung her head, Sabine put an arm around her shoulder. «I understand; I would be a ball of worry if someone were doing this to you. However, I know I can do this safely. The only thing to really worry about is if Harry can hold his connections, but I have an idea to help him do that, too. There is risk in life, my daughter; but I fear that the risk is greater if we do not 'fix' him, as Gabrielle says.»

Apolline hugged her mother. «Thank you, that does make me feel better.»

«Good, then I will not tell you how I really feel.» At her daughter's

alarmed look, Sabine chuckled. «Relax, I was teasing you. It is a good thing that you and Gabrielle have found this and brought it to my attention.»

The four children came running back into the room, Harry with wand in hand.

Sabine fixed them all with a very serious look. «This is a very dangerous spell with very serious effects and consequences. You understand that you must never do this as punishment to anyone?»

Four emphatic "Yeses" were heard.

«Very good. Harry, please unbutton your top; you may take it off or leave it on. Young ladies, please stand in front of Harry and when he is ready, place both of your hands on his chest or stomach.» Sabine watched Harry blush deeply as he unbuttoned his top and the girls approached him, each blushing as well. She thought it cute and showed the innocence of their love. While she knew what they would be doing in a few years, she hoped they always kept their innocence - or better - purity of love with each other.

Harry removed his top and Jean-Aimé took it for him.

«Harry, please think very clearly of all three girls and cast your Patronus when I tell you to. Once we start, you must hold it until we're done. If you need extra motivation, look at the three girls in front of you and pull magic from all of them equally. Girls, I want each of you to concentrate on Harry and try to push magic to him. You each need your bond to be exercised as much as is possible. Are there any questions?»

«Please do it as quickly as possible,» Harry asked.

«I will do it as quickly as it is safe,» Sabine replied as she pulled her wand out. «As soon as I cast the Bond Detection spell, cast your

Patronus. When I see that the three bonds are fully in use, I will drop that spell and start the Bond Severing spell. Once I start that, it cannot be stopped without difficult consequences. Apolline, when I finish, you will immediately cast the Bond Detection spell to see the results. Ready Harry?»

Harry raised his wand and put it between Gabrielle, who was in the center, and Ginny, who was on the right. When the Bond Detection spell was cast, Harry cast his Patronus and the Chimaera sprang forth from his wand and prowled around the room.

Sabine saw all three bonds being used and dropped her spell. With a deep breath, she started casting the Bond Severing spell, focusing it on Harry's curse scar. A part of her noticed that as the spell started to work, the Patronus stopped prowling around the room and started growling at the air in the direction the thin black line from his curse scar went. She did her best to ignore that and complete the spell. Nearly a minute after she had started, she drew a rune in the air and ended with a fast slashing motion.

As she slumped over in exhaustion, hands on her knees, Sabine looked at her daughter and whispered, «Now.» Apolline cast the detection spell and the grandmother looked over at Harry, who was standing only because the girls were holding him up. She let a smile come over her as she saw the light blue connections to the girls and nothing coming out of Harry's head. They had been successful. Sabine slumped into the chair behind her to rest for a moment.

«Lay him down and all of you sit,» Apolline quickly told them. Jean-Aimé jumped over and helped the girls lay Harry on the floor as he had already lost consciousness. The three girls fell to their knees and sat beside him, each looking weary and worried while holding onto him in some way.

With her wand, Apolline worked on Harry's forehead, which had cracked open and started to bleed a little. It took her a few minutes,

but several healing spells repaired the damage and Harry's scar was now very light and hard to see. She suspected Harry would like that when he woke up.

«Jean-Aimé, take Harry to bed. Henri, help Gabrielle. Apolline, help Hermione.» Sabine stood and put her wand away before she helped a wobbly Ginny up to the bedrooms, walking only slightly better than Ginny did.

Apolline led the way. «Everyone follow me.» She led them all to Harry's room and put the four of them into bed together. «They do this when something difficult happens,» the mother said a little defensively. However, neither of her parents said anything and Jean-Aimé wore his usual "I wished there was another way" look.

Henri helped his wife back down to the living room. «I believe I need to help her home.»

«Of course, but thank you, Mother!» Apolline engulfed the woman in a hug.

«Think nothing of it, my dear,» her mother said tiredly. «They are family. What more needs to be said? Although, I do wonder why that problem hasn't been noticed before? I would assume he acquired that connection when he received the curse scar as a baby.»

«It is yet another problem that can be laid at the feet of Albus Dumbledore,» Apolline said with some bitterness.

While Henri helped Sabine home, in England, a pitiful looking creature was screaming in pain. The two Death Eaters in attendance looked at each other, wondering what was happening and what they should or even could do. One had the insight to lift up his left sleeve and notice that his Dark Mark was not as dark as it was earlier. He silently nudged his companion and showed him his forearm. The other looked at his Dark Mark and noticed the same lightening. Other

than deciding that this meant their master was now weaker, they still had no idea what to do, so they just stood around and waited for orders.

A hazy but familiar voice woke Harry. "Are you really sure he's in there? All I can see is long blonde, brunette, and red hair. Although, I will have to admit that I envy him."

A very feminine chuckle was the first answer to the question. "Yes, he's in there somewhere. I'm sure that if we pull my daughter out, he'll be a lot easier to find."

His eyes came open and he slowly blinked as the covers were pulled back a little and a warm weight was removed.

«Ma-ma, why did you do that. Harry was nice and warm...»

«Shush, my daughter. It is past time to be up. Go get dressed. We have a fun day of shopping ahead of us.»

As footsteps left the room, Harry tried to focus on the two forms towering over the bed. "Sirius?" he croaked.

"Ah, Harry, you are in there. Time to get up, lad. Here, take your glasses."

When Harry could see better, he saw Sirius and Apolline, with the mother now trying to gently wake Ginny. He helped by giving the girl a shake, and then doing the same to Hermione.

"So is this what you do every evening?" Sirius asked teasingly.

"No, just when we need extra comfort; although, I don't remember going to bed last night," Harry said a little puzzled.

"That's because you were already out cold," Hermione said in her

own sleepy voice.

"And we'd like to continue where it's warm," Ginny said grumpily as she sat up, knowing there would be no more sleep this morning.

"Sorry, but that's not in the plans for today," Sirius told them good-naturedly. "In fact, your parents are downstairs as we used their Portkey to come here. As soon as you're ready and have had breakfast, we'll all leave for Paris."

The teens got up and each got dressed in their own bedroom. Downstairs, Dan and Emma greeted each enthusiastically, which the teens returned.

"How are you doing? Do you like your tutors?" Emma asked. Dan looked just as curious.

Hermione nodded her head just slightly. "Mum, I was telling you the truth in the letters. It's going very well, even the French. I'm getting a lot better at speaking and understanding it. Those two," she motioned to Harry and Ginny, "are getting even better than they were, although they were better than me to start with."

After breakfast, the Delacours led everyone to the family Floo, where Jean-Aimé took charge. "Harry, if you'll take your father's hand and go to Magic Street in Paris, and Hermione, if you'll do the same with your mother, then I believe we'll all get there without any problems. Sirius, be careful of the pronunciation. Apolline?"

Apolline took some Floo Powder from the bowl on the mantel and tossed it into the fire. «Magic Street in Paris.»

Jean-Aimé looked at Sirius, who said, "I think I'd like to hear it a few more times to be sure I got it."

"Of course. Gabrielle, then Harry, Hermione, and Ginny," the father

directed. Each of them went, pronouncing the French very clearly.

Sirius looked at Jean-Aimé. «Magic Street in Paris?»

"Yes, very good. Try it now. If you get it wrong, I'll come to the same place and help," Jean-Aimé told him with a smile. Sirius did it correctly and Jean-Aimé followed, arriving last.

Harry dug into his money pouch while he waited for Sirius and Jean-Aimé. He handed twenty-five Galleons to each of his girls and to each of his parents. "Here's some spending money if you need it."

His mother looked at him with an exasperated look. "Harry, you don't need to do this."

"I didn't think you had any Galleons with you, and I know the girls don't," he said with a grin.

Emma looked uncomfortable for a moment, but eventually gave in. "We don't and I can see we should have planned for that. We assumed we'd find a Gringotts here and could make an exchange."

"You can," Jean-Aimé told her, "but you're probably better off using Harry's money as you can avoid the exchange fee. If you have some Francs, you can give him some in return, as he'll need Muggle money at some point."

"We do have a few," Dan said as he dug into his pocket.

"Dad, why don't you wait until you're about to leave. You can give me whatever you haven't used then," Harry suggested.

Dan agreed, so they started walking down the street. The place was much wider and looked newer than Diagon Alley. Harry thought it was probably about as old as Diagon Alley, but suspected it was better maintained.

"Where would you like to go first?" Apolline asked the group.

"There!" Gabrielle said excitedly as she pointed to a clothing store.

Her mother chuckled. "Why am I not surprised? Be careful with her Harry or she'll own so many clothes you'll need a separate house for them."

«Mother!»

Everyone but Gabrielle chuckled as they went into the clothing store anyway. The females all looked around while the males tolerated it and spent more time looking out the window to see what else was nearby.

Ginny came over and joined Harry after a few moments. «Hmm, is that a Wand Maker's shop across the street?»

«Looks like it.»

«I think I want to go over there.»

«Why?»

«Because my wand is my grandmum's. It works, but I'd like to have one that was made for me so I don't have to work as hard,» she explained. «I'd like to do magic as easily as you, Harry.»

«You mean you never got one just for you?» he asked with amazement.

She gave him a pitying look. «You have forgotten that my parents never had much.»

«I haven't, but I just thought they'd get you your own wand. That's so

important...»

Ginny shrugged, not sure what else to say. Looking around, she saw Jean-Aimé not too far away. «Jean-Aimé? Can Harry and I go across the street or do you need to come with us?»

«It should be safe enough, but I'll come with you anyway to see an old friend.» Jean-Aimé started to lead them out the door.

"Wait for me," Sirius called out as he hurried after them.

«We'll be across the street,» Jean-Aimé told his wife before they left.

In the wand maker's shop, they found that it was very small, not much more than a front counter with a few shelves on the wall behind, and a sitting area out front with four chairs. The man who was behind the counter was reading a book when they walked in. He did not look nearly as creepy to Harry and Ginny as they thought Ollivander was, but he looked just as old.

«Ah, Jean-Aimé! Good to see you again.» He looked at the two teens. «Surely these are not yours? I thought you had just the two girls, yes?»

«Louis, it is good to see you, my friend,» Jean-Aimé said with a large smile. «These two are friends of my daughters, especially Gabrielle. Please meet Harry and Ginny. This is an old family friend Louis. With them is an old family friend of theirs, Sirius Black.»

Sirius stepped forward and offered his hand. "Uh, bonjour? I think..."

The older man gave a large friendly smile. "Hello, Mr Black," he said in heavily accented English. "What can I do for you today?" he asked, looking around to see who needed help.

Ginny shyly stepped forward. «My parents gave me my

grandmother's wand. I'd like to buy one that is for me.»

«What? You didn't have one fitted to yourself? The travesty! We must fix that at once.» The exuberant man reached under the counter and pulled out a number of blocks of wood. «Come, friend Ginny. Touch each one. Tell me which one calls to you, which is best. Each wand I make is made to be best for the buyer.»

As she stepped forward to check out the first one, she froze in mid-reach. «Sir, before we start. Can you tell me what this will cost? I want to make sure I have enough money.»

«No need,» Harry said quickly. «I will pay for it.»

«But Harry...»

«This is a school supply. The other money is for fun. Go ahead and find the wood,» Harry told her, pointing at the dozen long thin blocks.

Seeing how serious Harry was, Ginny nodded and returned to her task. A moment later, she handed one of the blocks to the wand maker.

«Olive, a very good wood.» Louis put the others away, leaving only her choice out. He then pulled a number of jars out. Some contained hairs or feathers, others looked a little bloody, a few were unidentifiable. «Hold the wood in your left hand and pick up each jar with your right hand. Tell me which feels best.» He and Harry watched Ginny's face closely.

The container that was third from the end caused a pleasantly surprised expression to form on Ginny's face. «This one,» she said confidently.

«Hippogriff feather,» Louis told her. «That will be a powerful combination with Olive. You are powerful girl, yes?»

Ginny blushed, so Harry simply said, «Yes.»

«I have no other work at the moment, so come back in an hour or so. Umm, two may be better,» he said suddenly, changing his mind. «Yes, two; I think this one may be tricky and I want to do it right.»

Ginny thanked him and they left the store. Outside, they found the others. Gabrielle was the only one with a bag, and it was small.

Hermione led the females over. «You bought a new wand?»

«Yes, my old one was my grandmum's,» Ginny explained.

Hermione nodded. «I understand then. I'm sure you'll do much better with your new one.» She looked around and saw something that made her smile. Without hesitation, she grabbed Harry's hand and pulled him down the street. «Come on, Harry,» she told him excitedly.

Sirius chuckled at the scene and followed them, as did everyone else. Hermione led them into a shop that specialized in eyeglasses.

An older woman ran the shop. «Good morning. How can I help you?»

«He needs contacts,» Hermione told her and pushed Harry forward.

«Hermione, what are you doing?»

«Fixing a problem,» she told him boldly. «You can't lose contacts when you're playing Quidditch or in a fight like you can glasses. Losing your glasses is not good, so we must fix it.»

«The young lady is correct. Contacts can't get lost when a young man is active. Come sit on my stool.»

Half an hour later, Harry had magical contacts. These would repel

dust and other small debris from his eyes, and he didn't have to remove them for a year. He decided he would have them replaced every Christmas, as that should be easy to remember.

They went to the book store and bought a complete set of books for Beauxbatons, all seven years. Hermione also picked up a more complete French/English dictionary, including those terms and concepts that covered the magical world, not just the Muggle one. Ginny found several books to read for fun, books that looked like they were of the romance genre, based on the pictures on the front. She blushed a little when Harry looked at them, but she did not put them back. Harry and Hermione bought several other books to learn from: Harry's were in Defense while Hermione's were about Transfiguration. Gabrielle bought a fashion magazine when her mother was not looking.

The shopping continued down the street, including a leisurely lunch bought by Jean-Aimé.

At the end of the afternoon, they returned to the Wand Maker's shop and Ginny picked up her completed wand. Her eyes went wide. «It's warm and it feels alive.»

«Ah, then I have matched it well to you. Give it a wave, young lady,» Louis encouraged her.

Ginny waved her wand and a rainbow of sparks came out. Looking at Harry, she grinned and jabbed the wand towards an empty area. "Expecto Patronum!" Ginny's silvery fox came out of her wand and she did not have to pull any magic from Harry either.

«Beautiful! Powerful, just as I said!» Louis cried and clapped. «It is a good wand, yes?»

Ginny stopped the spell and looked at the wand lovingly as her Patronus faded. «Yes, very beautiful and well made. Thank you!»

«It is my pleasure, young lady.» Louis turned and gave Harry and expectant look.

When Harry did nothing for a few seconds, Jean-Aimé coughed to get the boy's attention and pointed to his pocket. Harry suddenly understood what he was missing. «Yes, very fine work. How much do I owe you for this?»

Louis's smile returned. «My usual charge, thirty-five Galleons.»

Harry pulled his money pouch out and counted out the money. It was more expensive than Ollivander's, but Harry thought the custom work was probably worth it. He wondered if he should get a custom wand, but decided there was no need until his present wand gave him trouble.

«Thank you, Harry. Oh, here is some free wand polish for the young lady. If you ever need a custom wand of your own, you know where to come. Louis will take care of you,» the wandmaker said with a knowing grin.

Everyone told Louis good-bye as they left the shop and then headed for the public Floo. Jean-Aimé placed nine Knuts in the money basket and they all Flooed home.

In a few spare minutes before dinner, Harry pulled Hermione away from everyone else and into his bedroom. There he shut the door.

"What's wrong, Harry?" she asked.

"Nothing," he told her with a smile and pulled her into a hug. "Thank you for thinking of me today, for the contacts." She returned his smile with only a slight blush. All embarrassment left her as he leaned in and started to kiss her, holding her tightly as he did so.

About fifteen minutes later, the door opened and they both heard a "Hey!"

Reluctantly, Harry pulled back from Hermione and looked at Gabrielle standing in the doorway.

«What do I have to do to get that?» the little blonde asked with a slightly demanding look.

Harry could not help himself and chuckled. Releasing a red Hermione, Harry walked quickly over and scooped up Gabrielle and cradled her to his chest, causing her to squeal with delight. «You only have to be patient, my Gabi. It will come with time.»

«Mother says it's time for dinner. I was sent to find you because I could tell where you are.»

«Hmm, I guess it is hard for me to escape from you,» he said good-naturedly. «I guess my thank you is done,» he told Hermione and started to walk to dinner, still carrying Gabrielle. Hermione followed with a chuckle.

Ginny volunteered to do everything that evening that required magic, including floating all the dirty dishes back to the kitchen before the house-elves could retrieve them. She was very pleased with her new wand.

That evening, after everyone had settled into bed, Ginny snuck into Harry's room before he fell asleep. She kissed him thoroughly for nearly ten minutes before she snuggled into his bed with her head on his shoulder and her arm over his chest. To avoid trouble, she returned to her bed as the sun came up, catching the last hour of sleep in by herself.

((A/N: I guess we should have music here for "Another One Bites the Dust". :))

Chapter 24 - More Revelations

Classes continued and March turned into April and then May. One of Sirius's packages arrived in mid-May with letters from almost everyone that had been writing them since they had moved. They sat together in the living room on a Saturday morning and read their correspondence in their usual positions: Hermione leaning against one side, Gabrielle against the other, and Ginny sitting on the floor leaning against his legs. Not that he would ever say anything, but it made Harry aware that three girls was really one too many for comfort at times. Sleeping was another example where three girls was really one too many, but he would not give any of them up now. They were all precious to him.

«Neville says hi,» Harry told them all as he continued reading his friend's letter.

«Hi Neville!» the girls all chorused before all four of them broke into chuckles and giggles.

«He also says that the Ravenclaws are pulling ahead in points for the House Cup.» Harry looked to Hermione with a grin. «He blames you for not being there, Hermione, then he asks you not to hex him.»

«Ha, ha,» she replied sarcastically. «Luna confirms that and says the race is tighter this year. She says Fred and George aren't playing as many pranks, although she did like the one that made Lee Jordan's hair grow long and twist together to look like little snakes, making him look like a Medusa.»

Ginny chuckled. «I would have liked to have seen that one.» She reached for her next letter.

«Me too,» Harry agreed. «Neville also says Hufflepuff won their match against Slytherin and won the Quidditch cup this year. Angelina is pretty upset they didn't win. And hey, listen to this. Ron is

taking his classes more seriously now.»

«It's about time,» Hermione said somewhat disparagingly.

«Hey, he's lazy honestly, not because he had to work at it,» Ginny said.

«Err, sorry, Ginny.»

«It's all right, Hermione. Hey, I got a letter from Dad.»

Harry looked at the other two, sharing concern as they doubted it would contain happy news. Each of them reached over to touch Ginny in support as they sat silently with her. A tear started to course down her cheek as she flipped it over to finish the part on the back.

Ginny sniffled as she folded the letter back up and turned to face the others with a forced smile. «Thanks, but it wasn't that bad this time.»

«But you're crying. What did he say?» Harry tried to ask in his most caring voice, hoping she took it that way.

The redhead took her time stuffing the letter back into the envelope. «He said that he misses me, all of us really. He also said he had to force my mother to go to counseling with a mind healer. It's only been a month so they've only seen him four times, but he thinks it might be helping.»

«That's good, Ginny,» Hermione told her consolingly.

«It is.» Ginny wiped the last of the tears away. «He also said that he heard at work that the last task of the Tournament will be on the twenty-fourth of June and it will be in the evening. He wants us to come by that morning to talk to Bill, Charlie, and Percy. He promised that my mother would be gone for the morning.»

«I had wondered when he would have them together for us to talk to,» Harry said.

After a moment of silence, Gabrielle asked, «Did he say anything else?»

Ginny took a deep breath and nodded. «He ... he told me why mother is like she is, or why he thinks so.»

Harry grabbed her hand and pulled her up into his lap, causing her to smile in appreciation as she made herself comfortable there as she also stretched her legs over Hermione's lap.

«He said it's because of the way she was raised. Her family was very set in the old ways and strict. Everyone had to act certain ways and a person didn't go against that, it was unthinkable.»

«Was she...» Hermione paused and looked afraid as she said, «abused?»

Ginny vigorously shook her head. «No, he specifically said she wasn't abused. It was that everyone had a place, a role, so everyone knew how they were to act and it had to be that way. That's why she's so controlling. Well, that and the death of her brothers, making her want to control life that much more to prevent anyone around her from ever getting hurt. As to her other problems, well, that is where the old ways or old beliefs are important to understand. Like I said, everyone in her family had a role - dos and don'ts. Young ladies do this; young ladies never do that. That's why she thinks I'm ... shameful,» she ended on a whisper and another tear came.

The other two girls put their arms around her and hugged tightly.

«I'm sorry, Ginny,» Harry murmured. «It sounds like your home was only a little better than mine.»

She sniffled again. «No, I think you had it a lot worse; but that's why this hurts so much. Most of time, as long as we did what she wanted, home was nice. Though we didn't have much, we were fed, clothed, and knew we were loved. We had a family. But when ... my mother made us do something her way just because or said something bad about us, it hurt that much more because of how good it was otherwise.»

«You have us now,» Gabrielle told her very pointedly.

Ginny chuckled for real and snaked an arm backwards around the young girl. «Thank you - my sister; that is how I think of you now.»

«And you are my sister too,» the blonde said just as happily.

When they broke the group hug, Harry went back to his letters, searching for a specific one. When he found it he tore into it.

«What is it?» Hermione asked.

«It was something Ginny said.» He scanned the letter. «Dumbledore says I need to be at Hogwarts at eight on the evening of the twenty-fourth of this month for a meeting about the third task. I'll ask Sirius to accompany me.»

«Be very careful, Harry,» Hermione admonished him.

«Always,» he promised heartily. «And I'll talk to Mr Martin after to see what he can think of to help me.»

At 7pm on the twenty-fourth of May, Sirius Portkeyed in.

"Harry! Are you ready?" his godfather asked after he finished hugging the young man and saying hello to the three girls there.

"If I must," Harry said wearily. "You'll be with me, right? I don't want to get cornered by Dumbledore."

Sirius clapped him on the back. "Don't worry, Harry. I'll be with you the entire time and I'll help you avoid the old man. Oh, I almost forgot." He pulled a letter out of a pocket and handed it to Ginny. "This came just after I sent the mail package the other day. Ready, Harry? The Portkey should have recharged by now." He held out the silver cup.

Harry took a moment to give each girl a quick hug before he touched the Portkey.

Sirius said the activation phrase and they were transported to the Granger's house.

Dan and Emma each gave Harry a hug. "We'll talk to you when you come back," Dan told him.

Harry understood. They wanted to wait to see what would happen tonight.

Sirius Side-Along Apparated Harry to his house and they took the Floo from there to The Three Broomsticks. From the pub, it was a leisurely walk to the school grounds and then the Quidditch arena.

Only the Ministry judges, Crouch and Bagman, were there. Crouch still looked very tired and weary. It was nearly ten minutes before Krum and Karkaroff came, with Fleur and Madame Maxime arriving a few minutes later.

Harry greeted the Headmistress and in what he hoped was his best French. «Good evening, Madame Maxime. It is lovely to see you again and I believe you'll be pleasantly surprised when we talk in a month. Perhaps we can meet you in your office after you return and you can give us the tour you mentioned before?»

The tall woman smiled broadly. «Well done, Mr Potter. I would be pleased to give you that tour.»

He turned to Fleur and pulled out a letter for her. «Your sister sends her love.»

Fleur took the letter with a formal nod before putting it in a pocket. «Thank you, Mr Potter.»

Dumbledore and Cedric arrived last. Dumbledore gave Harry an appraising look, but said nothing for the moment.

Cedric gave Harry a friendly smile and a nod. "Good to see you again, Harry."

"You too, Cedric. Congratulations on winning the Quidditch Cup this year," Harry said sincerely.

Cedric gave him a very pleased look.

"Very good, we're all here," Bagman said jovially, preventing a response from Cedric. "So, does anyone know what we have here?" he asked as he waved his hand towards the Quidditch pitch to his left that was filled with small bushes across the entire pitch.

"A ruined pitch," Cedric said with dismay.

Bagman laughed. "Never fear, Mr Diggory. Your pitch will be restored shortly after the third task. So, anyone?"

As they all looked at the many lines of short shrubberies that were about a foot high, Krum finally said, "A maze."

"Exactly correct, Mr Krum. Over the next month, these plants will grow to nearly twenty feet tall. In the center will be the trophy for the

Triwizard Tournament. The first person to grab it will be transported back here to the entrance for the crowd to see who the winner is. Inside, there will be a number of obstacles that you must overcome on your way. Hagrid will supply some magical creatures," Cedric and Harry looked at each other and both shuddered at that thought, "and a number of charmed and warded areas will also be inside to stop you."

When he paused, Crouch took up the explanation. "As soon as you leave tonight, a magical covering will be placed over these walls that were planted today. The covering will block your sight so you can't see the maze before the task."

"Quite right, we don't want cheating," Bagman jumped back in. "You will each enter the maze one minute apart. The order is determined by the number of points you have so far. That means that Mr Potter will enter first, followed by Mr Diggory, then Mr Krum, and finally Miss Delacour three minutes after Mr Potter. The allowance to bring a hand-weapon in the second task does not apply for the third task. The only item you are allowed to have on your person at the start of the task is your wand, just like in the first task. Are there any questions?"

"What time does it start?" Harry asked.

"Ah yes, you do need to know since you aren't living here," Bagman said with a bit of a frown. "The task will start at 8pm on the twenty-fourth of June, which should give you an hour or so before the sun sets behind the mountains. You should be here at the opening to the maze by half past seven. There will be a tent near here for you to wait in, like in the previous tasks. Are there any other questions?" When no one said anything, Bagman smiled at everyone. "Very good then, have a pleasant evening and I'll see you again in a month as we end this competition and declare one of you the winner!"

As the meeting broke up, Fleur walked over to Harry. "Do you 'ave a

few minutes before you return?"

"I should." He looked at Sirius and received a nod. Harry stepped closer so he could whisper to Sirius for a moment.

Fleur looked at her Headmistress and nodded, causing the tall woman to leave, walking quickly back to the French quarters. Fleur started to walk very slowly back towards the carriage with Harry walking beside her.

Sirius stood where he was to give them some distance and privacy. He noticed that Dumbledore had remained as well and looked like he wanted to talk to Harry, but Sirius moved over until he stood between the Headmaster and Harry, preventing the old man from following without going through Sirius. That was enough to prevent Dumbledore from starting a conversation, allowing Fleur and Harry to stroll alone.

«Have you enjoyed the Chateau?» she asked softly and tentatively, using French to keep the conversation a little more private.

«We have,» Harry answered just as softly, wondering what she wanted.

«And Gabrielle? She is doing well?»

«She is doing very well. We are getting to know one another, if that is what you're asking.»

Fleur said nothing for a long moment. «Harry, I'm sorry for what I wanted to do in my room a few months ago. I have no right to impose myself on you, all of you. The idea of being with you was so tempting and I had not had time to fully understand the price. That does not excuse me and I am sorry, but I wanted you to understand that the idea of finding someone who wasn't bewitched by my allure was very tempting and that's why I started to try something with you. As I

promised before, it won't happen again.»

He thought he understood now. She had been feeling guilty. He appreciated her explaining her reasoning. «I forgive you. As you say, you won't try again.» He was also pleased that they seemed to get along now, since they were now family.

They were nearing the carriage and the two stopped. «Good luck, Harry. While I am considered good at Charms, I think you will win. Three minutes is a long time for me to overcome.»

Harry shrugged. «It's a maze and I think luck will count more.»

«But you have three extra minutes to be lucky,» she teased him.

«True, but you have three extra years of classes to help you,» he returned playfully.

She stepped forward and gave him a light hug, touching her cheek to his. «Give everyone there my love and tell Gabrielle and my parents I will write soon.»

«I will. Good-night, Fleur.»

«Good-bye for now, Harry.»

He turned and walked forty yards to catch up with Sirius and they started walking towards the school gate.

"And?" Sirius gave him a look that indicated he wanted to know all the juicy details.

Harry shrugged as if nothing mattered. "She just wanted to give me an apology and for me to tell everyone hello."

Sirius gave him a disbelieving look. "You mean she didn't want to

become number four?"

Harry snorted. "She will not become number four, at least not purposefully, and I'll thank you to get your mind out of the gutter."

"But it's so fun there," Sirius replied in his teasing way.

"Uh-huh, right. Just keep thinking that and you'll never find a girl for yourself," Harry teased back.

Sirius laughed. "I have plenty to choose from, Harry."

"Then pick one and settle down."

"Ha! Where's the fun in that?"

"Well, it allows you to make new little Blacks and give you an heir, as you reminded me a few months ago," Harry said before sticking his tongue out.

Sirius lost his teasing manner and gave Harry an appraising look. "You do have a point there." After a moment of walking in silence he asked with a perfectly straight face, "So, do you think you'll have a kid before me?"

Harry barely kept from tripping in his shock at the question, not sure if it was a joke or not. A glance showed him that his godfather looked serious about the question. They approached the gates while Harry was still considering the question. "I think you have six to eight years before that happens for us," he finally said.

Sirius grinned. "Which leaves me plenty of time to have fun then."

Harry shook his head, not understanding why the man saw having a child as a competition. "Let's hurry on so we can see what Dan and Emma have to say."

After they passed the gates, Sirius reached into his pocket and handed a sprig of greenery to him. "Not sure why you wanted this, but here you go. I summoned it when no one was looking."

"Thanks," Harry told him happily. "I wanted you to get it so I'd know what kind of hedges they were planting. Small details like this could be important, and since I'm not living there now, I couldn't get it on my own later. Now, I can show it to my Herbology teacher and learn what I'll be up against."

Back at the Grangers, the parents did ask what the third task was about. Harry explained what he knew.

"What are you going to do?" Dan asked. The other two adults looked very interested in his answer.

"Not sure yet, but I have a month for the girls and our Defense teacher to help me figure something out."

"And you'll be safe?" Emma asked worriedly.

"Safety will be foremost in my mind," he assured her and received a hug from his mother for that thoughtful answer.

Sirius Portkeyed Harry back to the Delacours, where he was greeted and interrogated enthusiastically. He told them the same thing, starting everyone there to think about solutions. He had a month to prepare and he would be ready.

Harry shrunk his broom and put it in his pocket, just in case he needed it later. Walking to the back door, he passed Hermione.

«Where are you going, Harry?»

«Out back, I think I need to take walk. I'll be back in an hour or so.»

«Oh, all right,» she said hesitantly, watching him closely as he walked on.

Harry headed out onto the back balcony and down the stairs to the back garden, then out into the vineyard. He slowly walked down a row while thinking, enjoying the peace and quiet as well as the greenery.

What were they going to do? That question had been plaguing him for the last couple of months, and he was not sure he was any closer to an answer. It was mid-summer's eve and he did not have much longer to solve their riddle.

He stopped to look at a vine, admiring how it grew and produced grapes and becoming lost in his thoughts.

«I don't think it's ready yet, do you?» came a voice from above.

The voice was so unexpected, Harry instinctively dropped to a crouch as he drew his wand, a Blasting spell running through his mind.

«Peace!» Jean-Aimé commanded from about ten feet up in the air on a broom. «Easy Harry, I apologize for startling you.»

Harry took a couple of deep breaths to get rid of the tension and adrenalin. Putting his wand away and standing back up, he said, «I'm sorry, but you surprised me.»

Jean-Aimé slowly landed. «I am glad you are so ready. It seems that Mr Martin's training has been helping you.»

«I think it has.»

«Forgive me for interrupting your walk, but I was flying back from

inspecting the vineyard and saw you out here.» The man raised an eyebrow as he adopted a casual stance.

Harry ran his fingers through his hair. «I have a problem and I've been trying to find an answer, but the answer has not been very ... forthcoming.»

«Perhaps I can help?»

Harry looked at him for a moment before he nodded and waved for his father-in-law to follow. He continued his slow journey through the vineyard with the man strolling beside him. «Half of us want to go to Beauxbatons next year and the other half us would like to continue our education here, if you would allow us. If you don't want us under foot, I certainly understand and then we'd definitely head to Beauxbatons.» He looked questioningly at his father-in-law.

The older man chuckled and patted him on the shoulder. «The difficulties of being married, and you have it worse with three.» He chuckled for a moment more. «I'm afraid I can't make your decision any easier. Apolline and I have enjoyed having all of you here and filling this old house. It has been almost no problem at all.»

«Uh, thank you.» Part of him wanted to know what problem they had caused so they could fix it, but Harry thought it would be rude to ask.

«I think it has been good for all of you as well. Your French is now quite passable. I will admit that I'm still not totally comfortable you sleeping with my daughter, but as long as it's not only the two of you, I can fool myself that it's still innocent.»

Harry looked down, unable to face his father-in-law and not sure what to do with that admission from the man.

«But you're welcome to continue staying here. What are the points for going and for staying?»

Harry welcomed going back to the original topic as well as no anger. «As you can imagine, going away and being on our own is one thought.»

Jean-Aimé laughed. «Yes, I can imagine how much my daughter wants to leave home, something else for me to try to avoid thinking about.»

«And as wonderful a library as you have here, the school will have a bigger library, Quidditch teams, and more things to do there that we can't do here.»

«Yes, more opportunity educationally. It also gives you the opportunity to have more friends.»

«Yes, I thought of that,» Harry admitted. «It also gives us the opportunity to be the target of rumors, stories, and be put in more danger too. We'd probably have to share the girls' secret to the school, to avoid much of that, but that creates its own problems.»

«Hmm, yes, I understand. But if you tell them the secrets, then they will know why three witches look to you, but they will not be able to tell anyone - although, perhaps we can come up with a plausible story that will not force you to tell your secrets. Still, I can see why you might want to avoid going there. Do you have a reason you must go? Something you can only do there?»

Harry thought for a moment. «Actually, yes. Ginny wants to try for a career in professional Quidditch. To do that, she's going to need to play on a school team for the experience and exposure to scouts. I don't think the rest of us have a career picked out yet.»

Jean-Aimé nodded sagely. «Well then, doesn't that make your decision for you?»

«You would recommend that, even though you said you try to avoid thinking about us being on our own?» Harry did not understand his father-in-law's thoughts.

The older man sighed and clasped the boy on the shoulder. «You will find problems like this in the future. Not every problem has an easy answer, or an answer that you like.»

«And that is why we have the saying about doing what is right and not what is easy?»

«Exactly Harry. While it might not be my preference, I must let my daughter grow up. Therefore, I will try to make it as good for her as I can. Note that I did not say easy. You will face problems in the future where you must disappoint someone, possibly even yourself. Being the head of a family has its good points, like you get to make the final decision; but it also has its bad points, like you get to make the final decision,» he said with a grin.

Harry nodded. «Someone is going to be unhappy no matter what I decide, so try to make it the best decision for all of us, what will benefit all of us the most?»

«That's not a bad way to do it. You'll have to find what works best for you and your family. That's especially true since you have an unusual family.»

Harry chuckled. «I do. Thanks, I appreciate the advice.»

«I'm happy to do help, as I'm sure your father would. You have asked him?»

«No, I wasn't sure he'd understand. The magical world is difficult for them to understand at times.» Harry loved and respected Dan - and Emma - even if they weren't magical.

Jean-Aimé nodded. «That is true for many things, but not all. I also suspect that if you talk to him, you'll find he understands more than you may think. I have a lot of respect for Dan and Emma Granger. It's not easy to raise a witch, and even harder when you don't have magic too.»

Harry snorted lightly in disappointment of himself. «I hadn't thought of it that way.»

«He's a good man, Harry. You're very lucky to have him in your life. Sirius can also be helpful.»

«When I can get him to stop joking around,» Harry returned with an easy grin.

Jean-Aimé chuckled. «He does enjoy life. If you have your broom, shall we fly back?»

With a smile, Harry gave the man a hug. «Thank you!» He pulled out his broom and enlarged it back to normal size and the two flew back to the chateau.

That evening, Harry took all of his bond-mates into his room and shut the door. They sat on his bed as he stood in front of them.

«I've come to a decision on our school choice. As was pointed out to me, no matter what I choose, I'm going to disappoint someone and I'm sorry.» He looked at the wall over them, not wanting to look at any one person at the moment. «Assuming we pass the exams, we will attend Beauxbatons in September.»

Forcing himself, he looked at the girls and saw what he expected: two happy faces and one disappointed face. He was not the only one to notice.

Ginny rose and hugged Harry, whispering, "Thank you." When she

stepped back, Gabrielle came over and did the same. "Take care of her tonight," the redhead said in a normal voice as she took Gabrielle's hand and led her out, closing the door after them.

Hermione blushed and looked down.

Harry walked over and sat down next to her, putting an arm around her. "I'm sorry you didn't get what you wanted. Are you going to be all right?"

She nodded slowly. "I will. It's not all bad."

"No, it's not."

Slowly, she looked up at him and stared into his eyes. "No, there are some very good things about going to school and I'll have to concentrate on them instead."

"You mean like the library?" he asked with a grin.

She could not help but chuckle. "There is that but it wasn't what I was thinking about."

"Oh?"

With a coy look, she said, "Let me go get my pyjamas and then you can take care of me, as Ginny suggested."

Harry swallowed with difficulty as she walked out. Perhaps going to school would be better than he thought originally.

(June 24th)

Harry and Hermione went through Harry's bag one last time, checking that everything he needed was there. The others only needed clothes for a week in England, starting with their overnight

stay at Sirius's and then to the Grangers for the rest of the time. Harry also needed a few items for the third task tonight.

When Hermione was satisfied, Harry closed his bag and looked around. Everyone was looking at him.

"Are you ready, Harry?" Jean-Aimé asked.

"Yes, I don't think there's anything more we need." Harry led the group to the Entry Hall and they all took a special Portkey to Sirius's house.

"We'll see all of you at dinner, Harry?" Jean-Aimé asked.

"Yes, we'll all be there."

With a nod, Jean-Aimé and Apolline Apparated to Hogwarts to spend the day with Fleur.

Harry looked at his girls. «You all know what to do if there is trouble, this morning, tonight, or really anytime?» He received three emphatic nods.

Sirius gave Harry a strange look for the French as he led them to the Floo. "Are you talking about me, Harry?"

"Would your ego deflate if I said no?" he said teasingly.

Sirius chuckled and grabbed the bowl of Floo Powder, holding it out for them to use. "Arthur has promised me you'll be safe, but I'll be here if you need to Floo Call me."

"I hope we won't. We should be back by lunch," Harry assured him as he took some Powder and tossed it into the fireplace. "The Burrow," he called firmly and stepped in.

A few seconds later, he arrived at the Weasleys. He stumbled but did not fall, which pleased him. Looking around, he saw Arthur was the only person in the room.

"Mr Weasley..."

"Arthur will do, Harry," the man said as he stuck out his hand to shake.

As they shook hands, the girls started arriving. Harry helped each as needed.

"If you'll follow me, I thought we could have this meeting in my shed," Arthur said as he led them out the back door. "We'll have a little more privacy in case Molly comes home early, although I didn't tell her what I would be doing this morning. I sent her out shopping to make this time easier on everyone and she said she had a few errands that would take her most of the day. The boys arrived only a few minutes ago."

As they approached the shed, they heard voices come out through the slightly opened door.

"Did you really do that, Percy?"

"Yes, Bill, I really did walk out to help Ginny. Why do you doubt me? I was in Gryffindor."

"Well, Percy, I guess it's because you were the quietest one and it's ... oh, I don't know, unexpected?"

"Your lack of faith is so gratifying," Percy said sarcastically.

Arthur grinned and opened the door, which squeaked and stopped the conversation inside. "They've arrived. Everyone take a seat. Oh goodness, I forgot the seats."

"Allow me," Harry said as he pulled out his wand. The others looked at him with disbelief, as he was only a fourth-year, but Harry only paused for a brief moment before he muttered the spell and a full-sized brown leather sofa appeared. He put his wand away with a smile and sat a little right of middle. He pulled Ginny to his right and let Hermione and Gabrielle sit on his left.

Arthur blinked a few times, amazed at seeing a fourth-year conjure something as complex as a leather sofa. "Right," he said slowly, "let me get the tea." He patted the back of the sofa once to assure himself before he walked over to his workbench to retrieve and pass out seven mismatched mugs of tea, keeping the last for himself.

"That was impressive, Harry," Bill said as the tea was being handed out. "I thought Conjuring wasn't taught until fifth year, or at least it wasn't when I was there."

"It was still in fifth-year when I was there," Percy commented, also giving Harry a close look, as was Charlie.

Harry gave a rueful smile as he looked down for a moment in embarrassment. "Well, you see, we had Sirius teach us early, and there are a few things that are useful enough that I've made sure I can do them: rope, cups, chairs, and lately a sofa. It took me a while to get the sofa and I only made it work recently. It'll last a few hours."

"I'm very impressed, Harry."

"Thank you, Mr ... uh, Arthur."

Harry's use of the familiar name raised the eyebrows of all three boys.

"Dad, why are we here. You said it was important, and well, I know you relax a number of the usual customs and rules, but I've never

known you to allow anyone of Harry's age to call you by your first name." Bill hastily looked at Harry. "No offense, but it is unusual."

Harry grinned. "None taken."

Arthur looked at each of his three boys with a serious expression. "I asked you to come here because it was important, and I have some news for you that I thought would be best given in person." He took a sip of tea. "And part of it needs to be done in person."

"Mr Weasley, if I may?" Hermione asked as she sat her tea down and she pulled out her wand.

"What? Oh, yes, I suppose that would be prudent. Thank you, Hermione."

The witch casts several privacy spells all over the whole room. Satisfied, she put her wand up and grabbed her mug of tea again.

"There now, where was I? Oh yes, news. I suppose this is all related, but I'll start with your mother..."

"Dad, should they..." Charlie trailed off as he vaguely waved his hand towards the couch.

"Yes, Charlie, they should be here as it concerns them too. Actually, I believe they already know most of what I'm about to tell you. Ron and the twins already know some of this and I shall share the rest with them when they return home next week." Arthur took a deep breath. "Your mother has always had a certain way of looking at life, one heavily influenced by the old customs and ways. The husband was the head of the household, but the wife ran it. There were many do and do nots, with a proper way for everything. I was raised in a slightly more liberal home, but I understand how she sees the world. Frankly, with seven of you children and with me being away for most of the day at my job, I was content to let her run the house and she did a good job

most of the time.

"However, as it has become more obvious with time, her upbringing has created problems for us and I didn't do my job as husband to help stop the excesses." Arthur hung his head and looked carefully at his mug. "Let that be a lesson to you boys. A proper house only works well if everyone does their part. A good husband does what he needs to and also lets his wife do as she needs to, but all in a proper balance." He paused and looked up at Harry, cocking his head a little. "I suppose you'll have to modify that appropriately when the time comes," he said with a trace of humor. The older three boys were nodding, then they stopped and became confused at the last part.

"I tell you this so that you know that I am aware of the difficulties your mother, and myself, have caused the family. I understand why you all have left the house as soon as you could.

"As I mentioned in the brief letters I sent you, we've been going to confidential counseling and have started to work through a lot of this and it has helped us. We aren't done yet, but life is slowly getting better. Nevertheless, there has been some serious damage already.

"I would like all of you to come home for Christmas this year, even if only for a day or two." Arthur looked at Harry and the girls for a moment. "Perhaps we should plan on Boxing Day, at least tentatively. Some of the damage can't be undone and we'll just have to live with it, but I would ask all of you to try to give your mother a chance to make amends where she can." He looked at each of his children.

"Of course, Dad," Bill quickly agreed.

Charlie nodded. "I can give her a chance."

Percy looked thoughtful for a moment. "I'll give her a chance too."

Arthur looked at Ginny, who was making small grimaces as she

thought through it. "Ginny, I know that in many ways, you have been hurt the most by your mother. You were never going to be just like her, no matter what she did; but I ask you to please try ... for me." He saw Harry put a hand on her back and rub gently.

"I'll ... try," she finally got out. "It will be up to her. But if she treats Harry or anyone else badly," she glanced down the couch, "I can't say what our reactions will be, only that she won't like it."

Her father nodded slowly. "I suppose that will have to do for now. Thank you, all of you." He finished off his tea and set the mug on the floor. "That's my first bit of news. I think I'll let Harry and the girls share their news before I discuss what happened after that. Harry?"

Harry cleared his throat. "Right. Well," he paused and blew out a breath as he realized the three Weasley boys were all giving him very scrutinizing looks, with a glance at their sister too. "I guess the best way to explain this is that we all have magical abilities and I've found that I have an unusual one. Completely accidentally, something happened a few years ago when I was with Hermione. This is important enough to us that we've hidden the knowledge of it under the Fidelius Charm."

"What?" Bill shouted, while his other two brothers looked surprised at his outburst.

"What's a Fidelius Charm?" Percy asked.

"Yeah, what he said," Charlie added, pointing at Percy. "I guess you've run into it because of your job?"

Bill nodded. "It's something that Curse Breakers can run into. A Fidelius Charm is used to hide information about something in a person. The most common use for it is to hide the location of the place someone lives to give them safety, but it could be used to hide almost anything as long as too many people don't already know." He

looked at his father. "Are you all right with this?"

"I understand and agree with their decision," the father said calmly.

"Maybe we should just get this over with, in order. Hermione?" Harry looked over at her and gave her a caring smile.

Pulling out her special piece of parchment, she read her secret. Ginny quickly went next. Gabrielle went last, not bothering with the parchment as she had memorized it in English, although it was said slowly as she had memorized words she was not fluent with yet. Her English was much better after four months of hard work, but she still had a lot to learn.

Bill looked back and forth among the four on the couch. "So what you're trying to tell us is that all three girls are bonded to you, Harry?"

"Yes," Ginny answered for all of them.

"Ginny!"

"Bill, calm down," she said fiercely to get his attention. "Listen to what I have to tell you before you try to pass judgment. All of you!" she looked each brother in the eye, getting a nod before she continued in a more normal voice.

"Think about what Dad talked about at the beginning. Bill, you were ten when I was born. I was barely starting to talk when you left for school, gone for ten months of the year. When you left for Egypt, without even returning home I'll remind you, I was still eight. It was about that time that I first started to realize things weren't perfect here. Two years later, I saw Charlie also leave immediately after school just like you had, and then the next year Ron went to school and I was left alone for most of the day with our mother. Do you remember what it was like alone with her? I do, and I could hardly wait to escape."

She turned to her father. "Sorry, Dad. It was never you."

He nodded. "I know you never blamed me, Ginny, and I thank you for overlooking my mistakes."

Ginny gave him a loving look before she turned back to her brothers. "Anyway, I had a plan to escape and, I'm ashamed to say that ... that my target was Harry. I was going to befriend him and convince him to like me enough to take me away from here, married the day we left Hogwarts if at all possible. So the fact that I'm bonded to him and know that I will eventually marry him one day is not a bad thing to me. It's just a small change of plans to get to the same goal of not being at home." She smiled impishly and looked down the couch. "Of course, I ended up with two sisters I hadn't planned on, but I always thought a sister or two would be great, so I like where I am."

Percy was the first to break the silence. "But I thought you and Hermione ... well, you said you had an arrangement."

"We do, Percy, just not the one you were thinking of and, yes, I knew we were using the word differently and I purposefully didn't tell you. At the time, we were trying to hide our bond because we didn't know what it was."

"If I may," Hermione spoke up. "We didn't tell anyone about our bond until after the second task of the Triwizard Tournament because we didn't know what was happening. We had a good idea how it happened, but not what it was. However, Gabrielle's mother knew and explained it to us. Once we knew, we told all of our parents. We've also told Ron, Fred, and George already, since they were at Hogwarts."

"But Dad's letter said that you weren't at Hogwarts anymore," Charlie half said half asked.

"We're not," Harry answered this one. "After Gabrielle joined us, her father came up with the idea to solve several of our problems at once. Hermione's and my parents don't want us at Hogwarts because they feel it's not safe - and we agree. We have been planning on transferring to Beauxbatons, but didn't know enough French. So when Gabrielle joined us, her father suggested we move to their house in France and use tutors to finish the year. That let us learn French better and faster, as well as finish the school year in safety. I have the third task of the Tournament tonight, but we're otherwise finished with Hogwarts."

"I think I understand most of that, and even most of the reasons why you would do that, but I want to know how this bonding happened." Bill gave Harry a hard look.

Harry did not flinch and kept a neutral look. "While we do know how it happened, we aren't telling anyone. We don't think anyone needs to know." Bill bristled.

"Bill, boys," Arthur said, stopping an argument. "I do know how it happened. It was accidental and there was nothing that could have stopped it. In fact, it's actually a good thing as you wouldn't want the alternative. Your mother and I would prefer that Ginny and Harry be married normally at the appropriate time; however, this is far better than the alternative if Ginny hadn't bonded."

Bill did not look happy, but he did stop arguing.

"Do you have any other questions?" Arthur asked. Bill and Charlie shook their heads.

"I do," Percy replied. "What are your plans? You mentioned Beauxbatons, then what?"

Harry sighed and looked at each of his bond-mates, all of whom only smiled at him, leaving him to handle it on his own. "We haven't fully

decided. We'll finish school at Beauxbatons. Ginny will try to skip to the fifth year to join Hermione and me next year. Gabrielle will try to start the second year next September, so we'll obviously need to stay in the area for three more years after we're finished with school. We'll find a house and jobs, and wait for Gabrielle to finish school." He shrugged. "Beyond that, I don't know."

Percy nodded and looked at his father. "I'm surprised you let them go to France."

Arthur chuckled lightly. "Thank you for the lead in, Percy. That brings us to my last bit of news." All humor left him as he breathed deeply a few times.

"As has been mentioned, things were tense with your mother when we found out about Ginny bonding with Harry, or that she had been bonded with him for a couple of years really. At the time, your mother was very upset and refused to allow Ginny to go, so I had to intervene as head of our family. Perhaps there was a better way, but I didn't see it then and I still don't now." Arthur looked down and his pause became very long.

"And what, Dad?" Bill finally asked.

"A year or so ago, Harry had approached me and said that he understood that a Life Debt existed between the Potters and the Weasleys," the three boys tensed, "but that as long as Ginny was treated well, he would postpone it indefinitely." The boys all relaxed.

Percy even gave a nod to Harry. "I understand, this was the real arrangement I heard about then."

"It was part of it," Ginny said with a knowing grin.

Arthur cleared his throat and all looked at Percy again. "Yes, well, Molly wouldn't hear of Ginny leaving and I was having trouble

standing up to her at the time; but I also knew that Ginny needed to go with Harry, so I took the easy way out. I asked Harry to call in the Life Debt."

"What?" This time it was Charlie who objected.

"It was my decision to transfer Ginny to his family," Arthur told them firmly. "Harry is blameless in this, he only followed my request. That allowed Ginny to stay with her bond-mate, and it was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back between your mother and me. However, I now see that as a good thing as it has allowed us to start to repair our relationship and the other relationships in the family. If you feel you must blame someone in this matter, blame me."

"Of course we don't blame you, Dad, it's just ... well, it's just so surprising," Charlie said.

"And sudden," Bill added, looking at Ginny.

"No, this was not part of my plan," Ginny told them, "but I'm happy with it anyway. I'm now Ginevra Emma Potter." She grinned mischievously, "Which will make getting married a little strange as my name won't change."

Percy shook his head and sighed. "And I thought all the strange stories I heard about people at the Ministry would never happen to our family." His father chuckled at his son's image of their family being perfect.

"If it helps, Percy," Harry said, "this ability for me to bond girls is very rare and takes unusual circumstances."

"If that's true, then how did you bond three girls?" Bill asked, quickly going back to how this happened.

"Believe it or not," his father answered, "other than Harry's ability, it's

all Albus Dumbledore's fault."

Percy looked confused. "I don't understand, Dad. Everyone knows Dumbledore is a little barmy, but how could he have caused this?"

Arthur looked at Harry, who nodded back at him to explain. "I have to be vague as that secret is under a Fidelius too, so I'll only say that Dumbledore allowed some very ... unusual?" He looked at Harry.

"I would have said bad."

Arthur acknowledged the choice with a nod. "Very well, Dumbledore allowed some very bad things at the school that never should have happened. In fact, the more I think about it, I'm surprised he hasn't been sacked yet. Nevertheless, what is done is done and I'm proud to consider Harry part of our family, even if it is unofficial."

Ginny looked at her watch and saw that it was now after eleven. "Harry, I know you're supposed to be going soon, but do you think I could stay here for lunch and maybe a little longer?"

Harry almost chuckled at the doe eyes and slowly batting eyelashes Ginny was giving him. He put his arm around her shoulders. "If that's what you want. When you Floo back, call Sirius's elf and have him find Sirius to bring you over."

"Thanks, Harry!" She stretched up a little to give him a kiss on the cheek.

"She always could get what she wanted," Percy said drily, causing chuckles from the rest.

"If you don't mind, Arthur, Ginny will be staying a little longer while the rest of us return." Harry stood, causing the rest of his family to rise as well.

"That's sounds wonderful. Thank you for coming over and explaining your secret with the boys," Arthur told him with a big smile. "Let me walk you three back to the house."

"Harry, I don't think this is the way I wanted Ginny to find a mate, but thank you for making her happy. It's easy to tell that she is happy," Bill said as he stuck his hand out.

Harry was glad they were not holding this against him and shook Bill's hand. "Thanks, Bill." Charlie and Percy also congratulated him and wished him luck.

Arthur walked them back to the house and they used the Floo network to return to Sirius's house.

Sirius greeted them when they came out of the Floo. "Wait, I think you lost one."

Harry grinned at him. "No. Ginny decided to stay a little longer to visit with her brothers and father. I thought that when she Flooed over, she could have Zoot come find you so you could Apparate her over?"

"That would be fine except..." Sirius paused, causing everyone to look at him strangely.

"Except that we came here," Emma said as she rushed into the room, with Dan following her.

Hermione and Harry were immediately swept into a hug by Emma and Dan. Gabrielle was also given a welcoming hug, although more sedately.

Harry looked at Hermione. "You'd think they hadn't seen us since Christmas when it's only been a month since I was last here."

Emma threw an arm around his shoulder and gave him a

good-natured shake. "You just wait until you have children, young man. We'll see if you don't feel the same way," she teased.

"Probably," he answered with a small grin.

"So Ginny will be joining us later?"

"Yes, Mum."

"Gabrielle, will you please stand next to Harry?" Dan directed. When the girl did, Dan shook his head in amazement. "I didn't believe Apolline that Gabrielle would grow so fast, but I swear she'd grown an inch since we saw her last. That was what, a couple of months ago dear?"

"It was. She looks ten and going on eleven now. Magic is so amazing," Emma exclaimed.

Gabrielle giggled.

"Let's all eat lunch," Sirius said, leading them towards the dining room. "Zoot even promised Treacle tart for you, Harry."

After lunch, they all talked together in the living room, where Ginny joined them at three in the afternoon, looking very happy.

(A/N: Next chapter is the third task.)

Chapter 25 - An Amazing Event

(still June 24th)

At six in the evening, Harry, his bond-mates, and Sirius walked up the path from the open gates of Hogwarts to the castle. Sirius walked next to Harry and told him made up stories of what he thought James would do if entered into the Tournament, causing Harry to laugh as each story became wilder than the last. The three girls walked behind, chuckling and shaking their heads at their silly adopted godfather.

Harry appreciated the diversion, preventing him from worrying about the third task this evening.

At the front doors to the castle, the group was met by the Headmaster and the Deputy Headmistress.

"I'm glad you returned, Harry," Dumbledore greeted him. "However I do wish you had accepted the invitation to come here this morning and spend the day with your family. I arranged for Ginny's mother to be here and she wanted to see all of you, but you didn't show." He sounded disappointed in Harry.

Ginny looked at Harry and shook her head slightly before she whispered, "She never showed up while I was there."

Harry could not figure out what Dumbledore was trying to do. Every possible situation he created in his mind made no sense; therefore, he decided to ignore the issue of Mrs Weasley. "We did arrive this morning and we've spent the day with our family, it just wasn't here." Turning slightly, he said, "Good evening, Professor McGonagall. It's good to see you again."

"Thank you, it's good to see you as well, and that all of you are well." McGonagall turned to each girl in turn. "Miss Granger, Miss Delacour,

and Miss ... Potter." Looking behind them, she nodded at the last person. "Sirius.

Ginny smiled at her. "It's all right, Professor. It's probably best to call me by my old name for a while yet."

"If we may?" Harry smoothly interrupted, since the professors were not moving. "I'd like to eat before the task and we'd also like to see some friends."

"Of course, Harry." Dumbledore waved them in and slowly led them towards the Great Hall. "You may sit at any table you wish; however, I believe the Gryffindors would like to see you the most."

"That had been our intent," he replied, almost annoyed with whatever little game Dumbledore seemed to be playing. He was so pleased that, after tonight, he never needed to return to Hogwarts again if he did not want to.

"Sirius, you may join us at the head table if you wish." Dumbledore looked like he did not really care where Sirius sat.

"Thank you, Albus, I believe I will." Sirius went around the edge of the room as they entered the Great Hall, before taking a seat next to Hagrid.

Inside the door, Dumbledore and McGonagall headed to their seats, but the bond-mates were quickly stopped by friends and well-wishers. When most of the people left for their normal place to eat, Harry guided his family to the end of the Gryffindor table. Fred, George, and Neville followed. Ginny grabbed Luna's arm and pulled her over too.

To Harry's surprise, a calm looking Ron tapped him on the shoulder and motioned him over to the side of the large room. A quick glance at Ginny showed she was surprised as well.

Harry stood near the wall and balanced on both feet, ready to move quickly if needed. He really hoped Ron did not cause a scene.

Ron looked down for a moment as if gathering his thoughts before looking Harry right in the eye, looking more determined than anything. "Harry, I've learned ... well, I guess you could say I've learned a number of unpleasant things lately. There's you and, uh, them." He nodded his head sideways towards Harry's bond-mates. "Fred and George explained a few things about our family that I'd never noticed before. Then my Dad wrote me about some more. Its all, well, changed how I look at things ... changed ... me. Being forced to look at myself wasn't ... pleasant, and I had plenty of time to do just that." He took a deep breath and blew it back out as if very tired. "I guess what I'm really trying to say is that I'm sorry, Harry. I bloody screwed up. I've been an ass to you and to Hermione especially, and a little to Ginny too. I'd have been angry if I'd been in your shoes and you said to me what I said to you. I'm ... really sorry..."

A feeling of hope and peace came over Harry, as well as relief that his concerns were not real. "Thank you, Ron. I hope you understand that we won't be best friends again, but we have a chance to try to be friends again. That is if you want to."

Ron started to grin. "I'd like that, I'd really like that." He held out his hand and then grinned more when Harry took it before pulling Ron in for a brief hug.

Letting him go, Harry started to smile. "So, do you think you can tell Hermione that too?"

Ron closed his eyes and took another deep breath. "I'd really prefer not to, but I did figure out I'd have to talk to her too, well, her and Ginny." He gave Harry a questioning look. "Gabrielle doesn't have anything against me, does she?"

Chuckling, Harry clapped him on the shoulder and pushed him back towards the table. "No, I don't believe so. However, you might want to sit in the stands near them during the task. That might be a good time to say what you need to them." Ron nodded as if he would rather not have to do the unpleasant task before he followed Harry back to the table.

Seeing an open place between Hermione and Neville, Harry took his seat and began to help himself to the food.

"Everything all right?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Wonderful." She looked surprised at that answer, as did Ginny, who was paying close attention to them from across the table. "Expect Ron to sit near you during the task and to have an interesting conversation with him."

"Harry..."

"Interesting and peaceful," he assured her. Turning to his other side, he grinned at his friend. "Neville! I've really missed having another male friend around. I've been outnumbered three to one."

Neville chuckled. "Harry, most guys would love to be surrounded by three pretty girls."

Harry grinned and leaned close to whisper to his friend. "Yeah, but the female hormones get pretty thick at times."

As Neville started to laugh, Harry received three less than pleased looks as they guessed at what he had whispered. He just smiled to himself, knowing he would probably pay for that in tickling later. "So, tell me about all the stuff you didn't mention in your letters..."

Harry stood with the other champions at the entrance to the maze. The judges were also present, talking among themselves. The

students from all the schools and a few guests, including Minister Fudge, were filling the stands.

Fleur walked over to Harry, looking much calmer than before the second task. She gave him a pleasant smile before she said, «I will not be holding back, Harry. I will do my best to win.»

He returned the smile and bowed his head slightly. «I would expect nothing less, Miss Delacour. Good luck to you.»

Deciding that was a good example, he moved over to Cedric. "Good luck, Cedric."

"You too, Harry. We've missed you these last few months. It's been almost boring without a Harry Potter adventure," Cedric teased.

Harry had to chuckle. "Boredom is to be preferred, I promise."

Moving over to the last one, he said formally, "Krum, good luck tonight."

Krum stood a little straighter and gave a half bow. "Potter, it 'as been an 'onor and gude luck. Ve vill not play a Quidditch game, no?"

Harry returned the gesture. "No, I'm sorry. I will leave after the task and will not return to Hogwarts."

"Too bad." Krum nodded sadly as his guess was confirmed. "It would 'ave been fun."

"It would have been fun. Maybe we'll have another chance later," Harry offered, not knowing if that would indeed happen.

"Come to Bulgaria and bring team. Bring pretty friends too," he said with a smile and a gesture towards Harry's bond-mates.

Harry could not help but laugh with Krum joining him. "We'll see." He was pleased that the ice had finally been broken with the very reserved Bulgarian.

Bagman cleared his throat noisily, his Sonorus already going. "If everyone will take a seat, we will start the last task." The cheering and applause were loud.

When it was quiet again, Bagman continued. "As you can see, we have a maze for the champions to run through for the last task. In the center of the maze is the Triwizard Tournament's trophy. The first person to grab it wins." There was more cheering. "However, there are obstacles in the maze for the champions to get past and to test their skill. Professor Dumbledore has been kind enough to put a covering over the maze so the contestants can not fly over it." He looked at Harry with a superior smile before looking at all the watchers in the tall stands. "To make the task more interesting for you, each contestant will have a charm placed on them that will show a color on the magical covering so you can see where they are." Many cheered at that, causing Bagman to pause.

In the stands, Hermione commented, "I'm glad someone thought of that. The second task was boring to watch." Ginny agreed with a nod.

«Not for me,» Gabrielle replied with a smile. Ginny bumped her shoulder good-naturedly, half knocking the little Veela over. Gabrielle tried to playfully push Ginny back, but the redhead wrapped an arm around the smaller girl's shoulders and held her tight against her. The two ended up giggling together.

Ron looked at Hermione. "Are they always like that?" Neville and Luna both looked interested in the answer too.

"More often than you'd first expect," Hermione answered.

Sirius, Apolline, and Jean-Aimé watched amusedly from the row

behind.

"First in will be Harry Potter, then Cedric Diggory, Viktor Krum, and Fleur Delacour, each a minute behind the previous." Bagman turned to the other more independent judge. "Barty, if you would mark each of the contestants?"

Barty Crouch looked a little more haggard then he had appeared even a month ago, but he was steady on his feet. "Mr Potter, as you will be first, what colour would you like?"

"Red?"

"Very well." Crouch cast a spell on Harry, causing his robes to glow red slightly. "It will show more brightly on the ceiling inside the maze." He turned to the next champion to enter. "Mr Diggory, your preference?"

"Yellow."

"Mr Krum?"

Krum looked indecisive for a moment before he answered, "Green."

"And Miss Delacour?"

"Blue."

Crouch looked at Bagman and nodded. Bagman picked up a whistle. "Ready, Mr Potter?" The whistle blew shrilly.

Instead of running in immediately, Harry lifted his wand and cast, "Accio Ginny's broom." A shrunken broom came flying to him from Ginny.

Bagman laughed. "Good cast, Potter, but you can't fly over the

maze."

Harry cancelled the shrinking spell and said as he mounted the broom, "I don't want to fly over it, I want to fly through it." He left a surprised judge behind as he flew into the maze.

He had practiced with Ginny's broom over the last week, picking it because it had better control for tight turns. He was sure hers would be better for this than his Firebolt. After talking to his Herbology tutor, he knew he could also blast a hole in the hedge and fly through in an emergency.

There were enough turns that he was flying only a little faster than running as fast as he could, but this allowed him to keep that speed without ever tiring. It also allowed him to ignore some of the obstacles, like the Devil's snare, the pair of Crups, and even a Red Cap.

Flying near the ceiling, he even flew around a Troll, who seemed surprised to see him up so high.

Some golden mist made him feel a little funny, but he was through it so quickly it barely affected him. He resolved to avoid it again in the future.

As he continued to navigate the maze, he heard a faint female scream; but as it was not near, he had no idea where she was. He hoped Fleur was not hurt too badly. There was also no doubt in his mind that his girls would be very upset if he bonded Fleur, giving him a second reason not to go search for her.

Coming around a corner, Harry was completely surprised to find a Sphinx in front of him. Hoping for the best, Harry shot a Blasting Hex at the hedge wall near the ceiling at the end of the corridor. The Sphinx must have figured out what he was about to do and crouched. Harry moved over to the right hedge wall. Carefully timing it, as the

Sphinx started to jump for him, he sped up and swerved left and then back right again, brushing the left hedge wall before he was centered and shot through the hole he had created. The Sphinx had not missed him by much.

Shooting through the hole in the hedge, Harry hit a spider web, almost tearing through it, but not going fast enough to prevent himself from getting stuck in it. It was his bad luck to come through the one place the Acromantula had built a nest for itself. Fortunately, the large spider was down the corridor a ways, but it immediately knew when Harry hit its web. It started to crawl back towards Harry while Harry was throwing Cutting Spells at the web. Cutting the web threads one at a time meant his freedom was coming too slowly.

As the spider crawled closer and closer, Harry became more desperate and stepped up the power. He cast his strongest Cutting curse, one designed to cut stone. It severed two threads of web and a leg on the spider it was so close. As it paused and hissed angrily, Harry changed tactics: he cast a Fireball spell. That melted more of the web and backed the spider up. Seeing a winning tactic, Harry continued to cast Fireball spells until he was free of the web. He noticed he had also burned a hole in a nearby hedge. To avoid having to pass the spider, Harry flew through that hole, hoping this one did not lead to something else as dangerous as the giant spider.

Flying through the hedge wall, Harry entered a long corridor that allowed him to see the trophy sitting on a table. With a grin, he flew over to the trophy. As he neared it, Cedric flew around a nearby corner on his own broom. Cedric flew as fast as he could in the corridor while Harry raced the last few steps on foot from where he had landed. With his broom in his left hand and his wand put away, Harry reached out his right hand. He grabbed the trophy and felt a pull from behind his navel. As the Portkey pulled him away, he looked over and saw Cedric still on his broom with a hand on the other handle of the trophy.

A moment later, they were both dumped to the ground and the trophy rolled away. Both boys shook their heads to clear their thinking and then looked around. They were in a graveyard somewhere.

"Where's the maze?" Cedric asked as he stood to get a better look.

"I have no idea." Harry tried to stand as well, but fell back down to one knee, his broom now on the ground. "I think I twisted my ankle on the landing."

"Hmm, you can probably stay there. I think I see someone coming. Maybe he can tell us where we are." Cedric dropped his broom and raised both hands over his head to make large waving gestures. "Hello! Over here! Can you help us?"

There was something about this that did not seem right. Why would they be in a graveyard? Suddenly, Harry spotted a large cauldron to the left of the approaching man. He was not sure why, but it seemed like a bad thing. "Cedric, you better pull your wand out. I've got a bad feeling about this."

"You mean like we're on a Harry Potter adventure?" he said with a grin. "Don't worry, that chap is coming this way. Oh, there's two of them and one of them is carrying something."

Harry was finally able to see who was approaching them, two large figures emerging from behind a large mausoleum. As he was about to call out, he heard a shrill voice cry out, "We want the one on the ground. Kill the one standing."

One of the men whipped his wand up and cast "Avada Kedavra!"

While Cedric stood there in shock at seeing the Killing curse rush towards him, Harry tried to dive towards the boy to knock him out of the way. As he made his move, he suddenly felt all strength leave him, causing him to only bump into Cedric instead of shoving him

hard out of the way as planned. Harry's vision was suddenly blurry and his ears hurt, but he could not miss Cedric lying on the ground and not moving.

Ginny was holding her broom in her hand, shrunken for easier carrying in Harry's bag and Summoning. The broom was yanked out of her hand as the whistle blew.

"It appears he's staying with his plan," Hermione said a little worriedly, her fear of flying not helping matters.

"Looks like it," Ginny answered a little more calmly as she watched Harry fly into the maze to get to the spot marked with a white "X" in the center. She had liked his plan with the broom.

When the whistle blew again, they watched Cedric summon a broom from the stands as well, probably from Cho. Luna had told Ginny that Cedric and Cho were still dating.

Viktor also summoned a broom, as did Fleur.

Ginny looked at Hermione, chuckling before she said, "Well, I guess they've all decided to copy Harry."

"It is a good strategy," Ron commented, surprising them by entering the conversation. "It also makes watching the racing dots more fun."

Indeed, all four coloured dots were zipping along, their colour clearly visible on the top of the maze. They would pause occasionally, but otherwise they rarely slowed down except to turn.

"Hermione, I'd like to apologize for the things I've said to you over the years, especially this year and our first year," Ron said, barely able to look at her. "As I told Harry, I've learned a lot of things in the last few months that have changed how I see life, and me. I'm sorry for being such a prat and saying what I did to you. Ginny, I'm sorry I wasn't the

best brother to you either."

Hermione was surprised, and a glance at Ginny showed her to be surprised as well as proud.

"Growing up isn't easy, is it?" his sister asked with acceptance in her expression and voice.

"No. It's been rather unpleasant."

"Thank you, Ron. I accept your apology," Hermione told him. "We won't be around much for the next few years except for holidays, but I suppose we can write and see how that goes."

"I would like that." Ron looked much happier and relaxed, as if he had lost several burdens.

They watched the dots continue to race around the maze, including Fleur's blue dot which came near Krum's green dot briefly before it moved a short way towards the back of the maze and came to a complete stop, causing concern from the French contingent. They all noticed Harry's red dot stop for a moment, then head on to the center. At the same time, they could see Cedric's yellow dot also heading towards the "X" in the center.

"Who do you think will get there first?" Neville asked the group at large. Considering it was a group that all supported Harry, it was not surprising Harry was the only name shouted.

To everyone's surprise, the red and yellow dot converged and then disappeared.

«He's gone! He's not here and we must go to him!» Gabrielle shouted in distress as she jumped up.

«Gabrielle! Stay here!» her mother commanded.

«We must go now! He is hurt!» Gabrielle grabbed Ginny's arm and pulled her up.

Ginny closed her eyes for a moment. «She's right. He's not near here and he's hurt. I can feel where he is.»

Neville, Sirius, and Ron looked and listened with confusion. While they did not understand the French that was spoken, the tones of voice and expressions did bode well.

«No, we can't!» Hermione jumped to her feet also to try and stop the other two. «You can't Apparate here and we haven't learned how either.»

«I'm going!» Gabrielle screamed as she pulled out her wand.

«I can feel the magic, Hermione. Are you coming or not? Decide now!» Ginny pulled her wand too and grabbed Gabrielle's arm with her free hand.

«But...»

Ginny spared only a brief angry glance for Hermione's indecisiveness and lack of willing to do what was needed. «Go next to Harry on three, Gabi. One. Two.»

«Wait!» Apolline shouted and lunged for the girls to stop them.

Ginny felt a hand on her arm as she counted, «Three!» She had already been concentrating on where Harry was and now she pulled all the magic she could find, both hers and Harry's, as she willed herself to be next to Harry. She felt herself, Gabi, and Hermione all being pushed through a tube together, hit a wall, then break through it to go further through the tube.

All three girls landed and stumbled a step, a cracking sound fading away as it bounced through the graveyard. They saw two men standing in front of them, one holding something and one with his wand out and pointing over where Harry was lying on the ground on his side, leaning on his elbow. They could feel he was still alive and hurt, but that was all they knew and needed to know for the moment.

"Reducto!" Ginny shouted as she cast at the man on the left, the one with his wand out and pointing in Harry's direction. The man dodged such that the spell only tore through his cloak without hurting him.

«You will not hurt my Harry!» Gabrielle screamed as she started to morph, little silver feathers sprouting all over her body. Her wand fell to the ground and a ball of fire appeared in her right hand as she made a throwing motion, causing the man with the bundle to duck and stumble around as he avoided the fireball. A fireball also came from Gabrielle's left hand. She alternated hands as fast as she could, forcing the man to stay on the defensive and hold a shield up without returning any offensive spells.

Hermione snapped out of her momentary state of shock from having successfully Apparated through Hogwarts's famous wards and cast a transfiguration spell on the grass to grab the feet of the man that Ginny was fighting so that he could not dodge as well. He was putting up a good defense and also casting the occasional offensive spell, even with the two girls against him.

Harry was surprised to see his bond-mates there, but he was happy for the help after Cedric had been killed. As magic felt like it was flooding back into him, he suddenly understood why he had had a moment of weakness. He was about to start helping Gabrielle when he heard a voice say, "Master?" He turned and saw the biggest snake in his life - not counting the Basilisk. On instinct, he cast a Slashing curse as the snake coiled to strike. The curse hit the snake in the coils and cut it into six pieces, causing a screaming hiss as it

died.

"No!" came a shrill cry.

Harry turned back and sent a Piercing curse towards the man Gabrielle was fighting, just as the man held the bundle in front of him as if to block a fireball. The Piercing curse broke through the weakened shield, went through the bundle and the man as if they were tissue. Both fell to the ground limp.

«Gabrielle, help them!» Harry instructed.

Almost without pause, Gabrielle started directing fireballs towards the other man. He had to go totally on the defensive now. Seeing the success of his last spell, Harry cast another Piercing curse. It also broke through this man's weakened shield and hit him in the hip, causing him to scream. The scream ended quickly as he was hit with a Blasting hex and two fireballs in the chest just before he fell to the ground.

Although the stench of the burning man was awful, Harry walked on his knees the three steps to grab Gabrielle and stop her from hurling more fireballs. He was surprised to feel the soft downy feathers on her arms, then the silvery ridge feathers coming down the back of her head, much like a Mohawk. She turned in his arms and he saw her transformed face for the first time. It was changed only a little, the mouth area protruding a little more than normal and the downy feathers here lay flatter, as did her ears. As she threw her arms around him, he noticed a little longer feathers hanging from her arms. Her Veela allure was also much stronger than normal, drawing him to her - almost irresistibly so. Surprisingly to him, she was not ugly this way but very interesting looking.

Harry heard Gabrielle whimper softly as he felt small movements under his hand that was near her neck. Pulling his head back a little, he saw her feathers go away, her hair return, and her face shift back to

normal. She went limp in his arms, causing him to pull her close again, holding her in her exhausted unconsciousness.

Looking to the side, he saw that Hermione and Ginny had put the flames out, but there was no doubt about the man's fate. Although neither girl looked very good, Hermione looked worse, like she was going to be sick to her stomach.

"Sit down if you need to. We'll take a minute to rest before we try to return," he told them.

Both girls sat down next to him, looking away from the men.

"What happened, Harry?" Hermione asked weakly, still looking as if she was about to be sick.

"Cedric and I arrived in the center from opposite sides and grabbed the trophy together. It brought us here," he waved a hand around, "wherever here is. Cedric saw those men coming over and one of them said to kill Cedric." Harry had to pause for a moment. "I tried to push him out of the way of the Killing curse, but I became so weak I couldn't do much and, well..." He could not go on.

Hermione gasped. "That was probably when we came to you. We made you weak and he..." She turned and lost her dinner. As she finished, she used a weak Aguamenti charm to wash her mouth out.

"I'm sorry, Harry. We were only trying to help," Ginny told him, laying a hand on his arm that held Gabi against him. She looked over at Cedric, who was only a few feet away. "Wait a minute..." Ginny crawled over to the boy. "Look, blood is oozing out of his hand in slow spurts."

"He's not dead!" Hermione cried and pushed to her feet so she could run over. "What was that spell?" she asked herself as she pulled out her wand. "Uh, Ferula!" Bandages came out of her wand and wound

around Cedric's bleeding hand, making it more obvious what had happened. "The Killing curse must have hit him between his fingers, causing him to lose his last two fingers, but it must not have been direct enough to actually kill him." She looked at Harry. "We need to get him to Madam Pomfrey as soon as we can. Hopefully, she can heal him, if he hasn't lost too much blood."

"I hope he makes it too, then he can be The-Boy-Who-Lived," happy that Cedric had a chance. Harry received two glares for his joke, which he had hoped would lighten everyone's mood.

"Maybe the trophy would take us back?" Ginny asked hopefully.

"We can try. Get everyone together and hold on. Ginny, I think you'll have a free hand. Summon the trophy to you. If it's still a Portkey, then it should take us home." Harry hoped it work as they arranged themselves.

When they were holding onto each other and ready, Ginny summoned the trophy. She caught it and nothing happened. "That didn't help," she said negatively.

"We have no option but to fly back," Harry stated as he looked around for his broom. He also saw Cedric's, although he wished they had a third.

"That could take hours and we don't know which way to go. If we're in the south, it might even be faster to go to London and then Floo back," Hermione told him.

Harry nodded his acknowledgement of the good idea. "You have a good point. So let's fly to the nearest town, figure out where we are, then we can decide how to get back."

"Great, I hate flying," moaned Hermione as she reached for Cedric's broom. "Can a broom even take three of us, because it'll have to be

three on one and two on the other."

"None of us are heavy, so it should work. Ginny?" he queried.

"You're right. It probably won't be very fast, but it will be faster than walking or even running. Or..." the redhead grinned. "Let me have my broom, Harry. I can scout which way to go to save us some time."

"Good idea." He handed it over and she took off.

"How's Gabrielle? Hermione asked quietly.

"She's not hurt, I can tell that. I believe she just exhausted herself between coming here and then transforming. I would guess either would have been fine, but both of those one right after the other?" he shrugged, knowing he was having to guess. He petted the girl's head, although he was not sure if he was trying to give her comfort or reassure himself.

"You should know that it was her idea to come here." Hermione hung her head. "I'm ashamed to say that I tried to talk them into not coming."

"Because the adults could handle it better?"

She nodded.

Raising her head up, he carefully leaned over and kissed her gently. "You're just as brave, Hermione, you came anyway and I'm glad of it." She moved closer and he put his free arm around her to show her she was still his.

Ginny returned a few minutes later. "There's a road not far from here. If we can get there, we can summon the Knight Bus and take that back to Hogwarts."

"Brilliant!" He always enjoyed making her blush, which she was now. "I'll take Cedric by putting him behind me and you can tie him to me. Ginny, you fly the other broom with Hermione in the back to hold Gabi who'll be sandwiched in the middle."

A few minutes later, they were flying towards the road Ginny found. Ginny also summoned the Knight Bus, which appeared about ten seconds later in its usual noisy fashion. An old man stepped off. "I'm Robert and this is the Knight Bus for the ... Bloody Hell! What happened to them?" He was looking at the two unconscious people.

"Long story, but help us get aboard and then take us to Hogwarts as fast as you can," Harry told him.

Robert pointed Hermione to a bed and she floated Cedric to it. Ginny floated Gabi in while Harry limped onto the bus on his own. "We have three other stops to make first, but we'll get you to Hogwarts," the man told them.

Harry wanted to say something very impolite, but held himself to just drawing his wand and pointing it at the man. "We have a medical emergency and many people, including the Minister for Magic, think we've all been kidnapped. You will take us to Hogwarts first and then you can go wherever you need to."

Robert looked at the driver, not believing what was happening. "Look, you can't interfere with the Knight Bus. You can get in trouble for this, lad."

Harry jabbed his wand and shot a Stinging hex out, causing it to hit next to the man. "I said this was an emergency. Surely you can change your order in an emergency." His wand held steady on the man.

"True, that is in the rules. Emergencies do take precedence. However, that will be fifty-five Sickles, or three Galleons and four

Sickles," Robert informed him.

"Fine," Harry agreed through gritted teeth. "The Minister can pay you, or Professor Dumbledore. Just go!" He waved his wand and let a few red sparks out.

"Frank, to Hogwarts." Robert grabbed a pole at the front of the bus and they took off. It was not long before the bus screeched to a halt in front of the gates of Hogwarts, almost throwing the students off the bed.

As the students left, Harry looked at the two men who ran the bus. "Thank you for coming here first. I also hope you remember where you picked us up because I believe the Minister will want to go back there very soon. You'll also get paid for both trips then."

The bus left quickly and the students slowly flew back to the Quidditch pitch. Harry had no idea how long they had been gone, but it was not long enough since it looked like everyone was still there. Even as they flew in at twice the height of the Quidditch stands, Harry could see Madame Maxime and Headmaster Karkaroff talking to Crouch and Bagman, and the two school masters were arguing something vigorously. He also saw Apolline, backed by Jean-Aimé and Sirius, arguing with Dumbledore. He would have bet his broom that was conversation that he would have found amusing.

Deciding to put those he cared about at ease, he did not care what Dumbledore thought, he descended quickly to land near Gabrielle's parents.

Ginny took a gentle spiral down, to pacify Hermione who was clutching her sides tighter than necessary to keep Gabrielle between them.

Silence spread as people saw Harry land, then cheers went up and people surged towards him. Fortunately, Sirius, Jean-Aimé, and

Dumbledore kept most people back. Minister Fudge made sure he was included in the group where they landed. McGonagall helped pull Cedric off the broom behind Harry and rushed him to the tent to see Madam Pomfrey. Apolline grabbed Gabrielle when the girls landed and held her tightly.

"What happened, Harry?" Jean-Aimé asked, also looking very concerned at his daughter.

Harry tried to reduce the parents' fears first. "I believe she's only exhausted. I can tell you she's not injured in anyway." Both parents relaxed substantially.

"Harry?" Dumbledore questioned him more with his look.

As he was about to answer, Harry saw Croaker and Bones come through the circle of professors and Aurors who were holding people back. This could work out well, he thought. He explained about the Portkey, the men, the girls arriving, the fight, finding Cedric alive, and finally their trip back - all as briefly as he could.

Dumbledore looked very thoughtful for a moment. "Can you take us back there, Harry?"

"If someone will heal my ankle since I twisted it, we could take the Knight Bus back to where we were picked up and then return to the graveyard. You could walk it, but flying would be faster." Harry looked at Apolline. "Could you keep Gabrielle here? I think she's had enough for this evening."

"Gladly," his mother-in-law agreed.

"Harry?" Hermione touched his shoulder to get his attention. "If you don't mind, I'll stay here with Gabrielle and Apolline."

"I'll come with you," Ginny volunteered.

Harry felt his ankle suddenly strengthen and the pain go away. Turning, he saw Madam Bones putting her wand away. "I can still do simple healing spells just fine," she told him."

A scream caught everyone attention. The crowd around Harry hurried over towards the commotion, except for Hermione and Apolline who was carrying Gabrielle. Those two moved Gabrielle towards the tent where Madam Pomfrey was.

Harry arrived in time to hear some brunette seventh year Ravenclaw girl explain what she had screamed about.

"...was knocked down when everyone started running around, but we didn't notice him for a few minutes. We tried to make him comfortable until Madam Pomfrey was able to come over, but I guess she's been too busy. Then he just started changing a minute ago. He was Professor Moody then he was this man, whoever he is. The only thing I know that does that is Polyjuice."

Director Bones leaned over a straw-coloured hair man about Sirius's age in Professor Moody's clothes. She removed a flask from his waist and smelled its contents. "It's Polyjuice all right. I also know who this is, and he's supposed to be dead." She stood up. "Where's Barty Crouch? Aurors? Find Crouch immediately and detain him for questioning." Several started moving away and through the crowd.

Croaker came over and knelt down by the man. He lifted the man's left sleeve to show a bare forearm. He cast a few spells on the man's arm, but nothing changed. Looking up, he saw Harry and smiled. "Harry, do you see this?"

Harry looked carefully. "I don't see anything."

"Exactly," Croaker said triumphantly as he dropped the arm and stood. "You've done it, lad. You've done it!"

"What are you talking about?" asked Fudge.

Croaker pulled the top Ministry people, Dumbledore, Harry, and Ginny into a tight circle for a more private discussion. Sirius and Jean-Aimé poked their head through a gap as best they could to hear. "This is the son of Barty Crouch, or Junior, a known Death Eater..."

"Impossible," Fudge refuted vociferously. "He's dead."

"Yes, he's dead just like Peter Pettigrew was when Mr Potter found him crawling around in Hogwarts last year," Bones said, supporting Croaker's claim. Fudge sputtered at her correction.

"Junior here is a known Death Eater," Croaker continued. "I know for a fact that he had a Dark Mark on his left forearm. That Mark is now gone and I bet it will be gone from the forearm of every living Death Eater. We could check Snape or Karkaroff since they're here," he said with a grin. "Anyway, the Mark is gone because the master is now completely dead - just like all charms end when the caster dies."

"Wait a minute. Are you trying to tell me that you thought You-Know-Who wasn't really dead?" Fudge queried, showing he was smart enough to follow Croaker's logic.

"Exactly, Minister," Croaker confirmed. "We've been studying to find out why he didn't die when we saw evidence of his continued existence. We found out why He didn't fully die and have been removing his connection to this plane of life. I would guess that bundle that Mr Potter said he shot a spell through was Voldemort." Fudge shuddered at the sound of the evil name. "Dumbledore is right. We must go take a look."

"I don't believe it," Fudge muttered.

Croaker bound Crouch Jr. "Amelia, do you have enough people to

guard him until we return."

"I should, but I'll send for more," Bones replied.

"Then those of us who are going, to the gates." Croaker pointed the direction and started to slowly walk.

Bones had a quick conversation with the Aurors present before she joined the march. Harry and Ginny followed after him, as they had to lead the way. Dumbledore, Sirius, Jean-Aimé, Bones, and four Aurors came as well.

When they flagged down the Knight Bus, Dumbledore ended up paying the three Galleons and four Sickles for Harry's first trip as well as another six Galleons and eight Sickles for the current ride.

Robert and Frank dropped them off in what appeared to be the middle of nowhere, with only a few lights in the distance. Frank had claimed they were near Little Hangleton. Only Dumbledore looked like he had any idea where he was based on the name.

Harry and Ginny pulled out their brooms and took to the air to get their bearings. Once they were sure, they lead the group flying towards the graveyard that was about a mile away. The adults followed the two on brooms, Apparating by line of sight to cover the distance in four short jumps.

Bones and Croaker took the lead of the investigation in the graveyard, although Dumbledore poked around a lot, Harry noticed.

"This is, or was, Walden Macnair," Croaker said identifying the man who had been pierced through the chest, before he started to look at the bundle the Death Eater had been holding.

"But he works for the Ministry!" Fudge objected strenuously.

"I'm quite sure other Death Eaters do too," Croaker said almost distractedly while he continued to examine the bundle.

"I believe this was Theodore Avery, also a 'known Death Eater'" Bones said a little distastefully after checking the burnt body.

"Harry?" Dumbledore asked tiredly and with a tinge of disappointment. "Did you have to kill them?"

"The first spell they used was the Killing curse, Professor," Harry replied heatedly, "and they were two adults against students who haven't even had their OWLs yet. I think we're allowed to defend ourselves as much as we can."

"Quite right, Mr Potter," Bones said with authority as she stood. "There will be no charges pressed against any of you for this."

"Most definitely not," Croaker added as he also stood, finished with his examination. "Our project is indeed done. I want to take a sample of what's in the cauldron, but otherwise, this can all be cleaned up."

Fudge looked and sounded confused. "Wait, what project?"

"This ... thing," Croaker finally decided as he pointed at the small body next to Macnair, "housed what was left of Voldemort's spirit..."

"No, absolutely not!" Fudge objected. "He died over ten years ago."

Croaker shrugged. "You may deny reality all you want, Minister, but it doesn't change the truth. The truth is that it's easily proved that Voldemort did not die in 1981, although the part of him that was alive was quite pitiful. Several of us have been working behind the scenes to help send him on beyond this life, and Mr Potter finished the task tonight."

Fudge looked around between all the parties. "I still don't believe it."

"And that's why we didn't tell you," Croaker told him as the self-appointed spokesperson. "However, it doesn't matter now. In fact, I think I'd prefer this not even be mentioned, other than some former Death Eaters tried to kidnap Mr Potter for nefarious purposes. We will have to explain why Misters Potter and Diggory disappeared from Hogwarts, and we have Crouch Jr to explain. Amelia?"

"There are some very definite advantages to not spreading all the details around," she said slowly, thinking it through as she spoke.

"Indeed we will not say anything about You-Know-Who at all," Fudge demanded.

Harry looked at Ginny sadly, a look that she returned. It was exceedingly obvious to both of them why the Wizarding world was in the state it was when truth was covered up. He wondered how Sirius dealt with the Ministry as much as he did.

Bones ordered the Aurors to start cleaning up the scene and taking the bodies away while Croaker took his sample of the potion in the large cauldron. Dumbledore created a Portkey that took them all back to Hogwarts.

Harry was amazed that it was still crowded on the Quidditch pitch. Searching his connection to Hermione, he led Ginny to the tent. Inside, he saw Fleur and Viktor for the first time since the start of the task; both were resting and looked asleep, with Apolline watching over them. Madam Pomfrey was attending to Cedric while Hermione looked on. "How is he?"

Hermione turned and wrapped Harry in a hug. "Cedric is going to live. It looks like the curse hit the webbing between his fingers, causing him to permanently lose the last two fingers of his left hand, but he'll live."

Harry could not help the grin that broke out. "That's really good to hear. I'm glad he's going to make it." He looked around to find his last girl, but didn't see her. "Where's Gabrielle?"

"She woke up and had to go to the bathroom," Hermione replied. "I sent her to the Quidditch changing rooms a few minutes ago."

Out of instinct, Harry pushed his magic through the bond to find his youngest bond-mate and was very surprised to feel her not close by, but much further way in the direction of the castle. "She's not there, she's in the castle." He pulled the broom out and strode towards the tent opening. As he reached the opening, he suddenly felt Gabrielle change: she was hurt. "Ginny! Bring Hermione now!" He threw his leg over Cedric's broom, which he had been using, and flew up and into an immediate hard right turn. As he came around the tent, he pushed the broom as hard and as fast as it would go, sparing no concern for his safety.

While the grass sped by and it took only a couple handful of seconds to reach the main doors of the castle, it felt like forever to Harry. His heart was racing, afraid of what he might find. Fortunately, the doors were open and he flew in, slowing only enough not to splatter himself on the wall. Reaching out to her, it felt like she was near where the bathrooms were. He continued to fly down the corridor, taking the last turn as fast as he dared. He did not like what he saw as he rounded the corner and enjoyed letting his anger out.

(A little earlier...)

The Pepperup potion they had given her had helped her feel a lot better; however, it did not take care of the problem of needing to go to the bathroom.

"Hermione?" Gabrielle pulled on the older girl's sleeve. "I need a bathroom."

"The Quidditch changing rooms has one. They're right outside and to the left, the building next to us. Do you need me to go with you?"

"No, they are near." Gabrielle got up off the table and left the tent. The building was right there. It took a moment, but she found the door and it was locked. As she was about to go back to Hermione, she saw the castle in the background and decided that probably was the nearest place to go, so she started walking.

He was so frustrated. He had been careful, discreet, and vigilant, but the Veela girl from Beauxbatons was always with multiple people. He needed to find her alone because she was his ticket to restoring his honor and fortune - well, mostly his fortune, but there was some bragging rights to go along saying you had captured a Veela. It had taken almost every Knut he had to buy the equipment to capture her and it had been frustrating to be patient for months, but it would all be for naught if he could not get her alone. He was sure that the chaos of the third task would present him with the best chance to catch her alone. So far, he had been wrong.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the younger Veela leave the Healer's tent alone. Granger stepped out for a moment to watch her go towards the Quidditch changing room before stepping back inside. With glee, he started walking his way over towards the small building, nodding to friends as he went. When he reached the small building, he grew frustrated again because she had disappeared. Starting to panic, he searched the area quickly and then let out a sigh of relief when he saw her heading towards the castle all alone. With a smile, he started to follow her, keeping to the shadows as much as possible.

The Galleon signs were multiplying in his head as he considered what he could get for a young virgin Veela.

Gabrielle walked quickly into the castle. She thought she remembered where the bathrooms were on the first floor from her

previous visit, and they were where she remembered.

Feeling much better after her visit, she walked out of the bathroom and straight into a wand pointed at her, causing her to freeze.

"A little Veela all alone just for me," he chuckled.

Gabrielle knew she could never pull her wand in time, but as he said, she was a Veela and she had been learning to use her powers. Tonight had been a very good example of what she and her ancestors could do. Pulling as hard as she could, she tried to turn her allure on, but nothing happened - not even the smallest feeling of allure.

He laughed now. "Why the face little girl? Did you lose something?"

There was no doubt in her mind; he had done something to her, but she could not figure out what. All he had in his hands was his wand. She started to inch backwards, hoping to hide in the bathroom.

"I didn't say you could move," he said, sounding annoyed.

She bumped into the bathroom door behind her. Remembering Harry's talk about a signal, she slammed her fist into the door as hard as she could as his wand started to move, hurting her hand and knuckles something terrible.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

As her body stiffened, Gabrielle felt real fear for the first time in her life. There was no doubt she was breathing, but that was almost the only thing for the next few seconds. When she tried to blink, she found that worked to, but nothing else did.

He took a long moment to look her over. "You'll fetch me a very good price, little girl."

She felt dirty now and her fears doubled as every bad story she had heard about Veela slaves flew through her head. She would have screamed if she could have.

"Shall we go on a trip together?" he drawled.

In her mind, she knew there were only two ways out of this. Concentrating on the good one, she felt hope for the first time and would have breathed her relief deeply if it had been possible.

As he started to close the three steps between them, a fast moving shape flew by and she saw a foot kick the evil blond boy in the head, causing him to go flying down the corridor. She wanted to weep with joy. A broom was dropped and she felt her body relax as the spell was released just before the arms of her true love wrapped around her, holding her as if he never wanted to let go - and she did not want him to let go. The tears started to flow now and she made no effort to stop her sobs.

"Gabrielle, my Gabrielle," Harry whispered softly to her, "my precious Gabi." He held her while she cried and while he tried to get his breath back. He was so worked up he could barely breathe.

Two sets of feet came running over and more arms flew around them. They all held each other for a long moment with lots of heavy breathing and some sniffles.

"What happened?" Hermione asked softly.

Gabrielle sniffled again. "H-he s-s-said, h-he was going t-to s-s-sell me." She felt Harry stiffen and then start to pull away.

"Harry, no!" Hermione shouted as she grabbed at his arm, which he shrugged and pulled out of her grasp.

"Malfoy owes me for what he's done over the years and this - this is too much! You do not sell people into slavery - especially that kind of slavery. He will not get away with it! Ever again!" he shouted fiercely.

"Harry..."

"I say we just Vanish him," Ginny growled.

"Ginny!"

"How would you feel about being sold as a sex slave?" Ginny asked her friend angrily.

Gabrielle whimpered and threw herself at Ginny, clinging tightly to the sympathetic girl.

Ginny shot a contemptuous look at Hermione. "I think that answers the question rather well."

"Of course no one wants that!" Hermione backpedalled quickly. "You know I hate slavery, but you're discussing murder." It was silent for a long moment after that stark comment.

"Hermione, Ginny," Harry said in too calm a voice for the situation. "Take Gabrielle back to the tent and find Sirius. Tell him we need to leave just as soon as I return and I won't be long behind you."

"But Harry..."

"Hermione!" he said sharply, cutting her off before he continued in the fake calm. "I promise I won't kill him directly and when I walk away he'll be alive. I also promise that I will do this only in emergencies, but as the head of the house of Potter, go follow my command." He hated reaching into this part of the Pureblood culture Sirius had shared with him, but they did not have the time to argue.

When Hermione continued to stand there in disbelief of what he had said to her, Ginny reached out and shoved Hermione a little back towards the way they had come. Hermione looked at Ginny also in disbelief. Gabrielle separated from Ginny a little and reached out towards Hermione and grabbed her robes and pulled. It was slow, but the two younger girls pulled the disbelieving older one towards the broom they had arrived on. Under Harry's intensely watchful eye, Hermione mounted the broom with Ginny in the front and Gabrielle in the middle before they left for the tent.

In several ways, Harry was not proud of what he had just done, but he also knew it was a necessity. Jean-Aimé's words came back to him about sometimes having to make decisions even he did not like.

Harry took a deep breath and surveyed the scene for a moment. Making up his mind, he levitated a still unconscious Malfoy over so his head was next to the bathroom door, propping it open a little. Malfoy's wand went nearby but out of reach. Lastly Harry summoned his broom and stepped over Malfoy so he was in the bathroom but with the door open, propped on the Slytherin's head.

As he moved and positioned Malfoy, a blue stone with gold flakes fell out of the top of the boy's shirt and onto his bare neck. Now Harry understood how Gabrielle had been overpowered so easily: a Veela Capture Stone. He reached down and grabbed the necklace and pulled hard, snapping the thin gold chain, and placed it in a pocket.

Ready for the confrontation, he cast a body-bind on the Slytherin and revived him. As Malfoy came around, Harry squatted down so Malfoy could see him easier. The boy's eyes went wide.

"It's not so fun when the tables are turned, is it Malfoy?" Harry slowly, allowing the fear to build. "Worse yet, you picked the wrong girl to go after. Oh, I'd be really angry at you for trying to sell any girl as a sex slave, but picking Gabrielle was a very - very - very bad choice." Harry found it interesting that Malfoy could breathe faster in a

body-bind. He was quite glad the spell prevented messes from lower down.

"I learned a spell recently from my Defense tutor that I've been dying to try out and you're going to volunteer to help me, Malfoy. But before I do it, I should tell you one other thing." He leaned a little closer and whispered, "I'm the one who destroyed your house to send your father to prison because your father tried to kill Ginny. So take a moment and think about what I'm going to do because you tried to torture Gabrielle by selling her. Hmm?" He was sure Malfoy's eyes could not go any wider than they were now.

Standing up, he stepped back to close the door to just a crack so it rested against Malfoy's head. Allowing only his wand to stick out, he used as much power as he could. "Obliviate! You tried to capture the little Veela girl but she pushed you so you fell against the door and you just came to. You remember your mother telling you that if you did not capture her that you should immediately tell a friend you had to go meet your mother and then go to the path next to Hagrid's hut and follow the path into the forest. Your mother will use a clicking sound to get your attention." He ended the active portion of the Obliviate spell and silently canceled the body-bind. As Malfoy shook his head as if coming to, which allowed the door to close, Harry silently stepped back and readied himself, just in case he botched the spell and Malfoy came in after him.

Harry had done his best to erase the last five minutes of Malfoy's memories, now it was up to Fate as to what happened to him. If the spell failed and the Slytherin came into the bathroom after him, Harry would fight him and show him no mercy. If the boy walked away, then what happened would happen.

Listening carefully, Harry heard scraping noises and then Malfoy's footsteps going away. Counting to ten, Harry slowly opened the door, ready for everything, and looked around. The corridor was empty.

He silenced his footsteps, cast a Disillusionment charm on himself and hurried out on foot. He was pleased he had finally made the Disillusionment charm work, as was Professor Martin. Harry caught up with Malfoy as the boy went out the front door. Harry mounted his broom and flew high enough that he and his broom would not be seen in the darkness and followed Malfoy.

It did not take long for Malfoy to find another Slytherin coming back to the castle. They talked for a moment before Malfoy changed directions, heading for the Forbidden Forest. With a smile, Harry headed towards the Quidditch changing rooms as fast as he could go, looking for his family as he descended. Sirius was near the tent with a distraught Hermione, a determined Ginny, and a still scared Gabrielle who clung to Ginny. Apolline and Jean-Aimé were there too. He found it amusing that his youngest bond-mate was the only one tracking his location as he flew over and landed, then cancelled the Disillusionment.

As Harry rounded the corner of the tent, Gabrielle ran to him. Fortunately, he was ready for it. Leaning down, he scooped her up and held her to his chest while he walked to the group.

"Harry? What's going on?" Sirius demanded. "Everyone..."

"Not here, Sirius," he said authoritatively, like a head of house, stopping Sirius cold. "We are leaving now. I'll explain when we get home. Everything else here can wait until tomorrow - full stop. I think you said you had a Portkey. Do we have to be outside the gates to use it?"

"Err, yes," Sirius said much more meekly, surprised by the take-charge attitude Harry was exhibiting.

"Then let's go. I'll explain at home." He marched towards the gates, still carrying Gabrielle with his group following him.

A number of people waved at him, so he put on a fake smile and nodded to them or said "Hi". He saw Neville and Luna standing close together and talking.

"Hey, Harry!" Neville called out and walked over.

"I'm sorry, but this is not a good time, Neville, Luna. I hope you'll forgive me, but we need to leave immediately. I promise we'll all get together soon after you go home for the summer and I'll do my best to explain then." He never stopped walking, forcing his friends to walk with him.

"Uh, sure, Harry. Congratulations, by the way."

"Thanks, Neville."

"And Fudge is looking for you to give you your award."

"He can give it to me later. I really will find you next week," Harry promised sincerely.

"I know, I trust you, Harry."

"Thanks Neville," Harry threw over his shoulder as Neville stopped trying to keep up. He noticed Ginny whispering furiously to Luna, probably trying to condense a three minute conversation into one minute. When Neville dropped back, so did Luna, leaving only the seven to continue their journey. Harry was happy no one else tried to stop them along the way.

At the gates, Harry gave a commanding look at Sirius, who pulled a small British flag on a stick out of an inside pocket without a word. When everyone was touching it, he activated the Portkey and they all left, landing in Sirius's living room seconds later.

As everyone started to stand, almost everyone started asking in their

own way, "What happened?"

"Enough!" Sirius shouted. The voices petered off allowing him to say, "Let's all take a seat and let Harry tell us what was so important."

"And why Gabrielle is so upset," Apolline insisted.

"What happened?" shouted an almost hysterical Emma Granger, with Dan holding her at his side and not looking much better. "Where have all of you been? You should have been home almost two hours ago! Dumbledore almost killed you again, didn't he?"

"Oh Merlin!" Sirius swore, followed by several other words that should have landed him in trouble, but did not because everyone understood the gravity of his error. "I knew I forgot something important! I'm so sorry I forget to send word we'd been delayed," he told the Grangers. Dan acknowledged the apology with a tight nod as he continued to try to calm Emma down.

"We're all alive and no one's really hurt, Mum. I'll explain after one other thing first." Harry directed Gabrielle to Ginny for the moment and put his arms around Hermione, who stood stiffly in his arms and for the first time not hugging him back. He heard his mother's quiet sobs in the background, but did his best to ignore them to deal with a more important person: his first bond-mate and wife-to-be.

Sirius quietly called his elf and ordered tea while Harry took a deep breath before trying his best to repair the damage he had created.

"Hermione, I'm so sorry I had to do that," he whispered into her ear. "Please understand that there was no time for discussion as anyone could have come along and found us. Also, I was holding onto my temper by the smallest of threads and I didn't want to lose my anger on you. You know I disagree with most of the Pureblood customs and I promise you, I'll only ever force my decision on all of you without discussion under the direst of emergencies and I hope it never

happens again. Forgive me, please," he begged her. She continued to stand there stiffly, making him almost start to cry for hurting her so badly.

Finally, she whispered. "He was still alive when you left him?"

"He was, and talking to a friend when I flew away." When her arms started to slowly move to his back, he crushed her to him. "Thank you," he hoarsely whispered.

"I expect you to keep that promise, Harry."

"Only during the very direst emergencies," he whispered before breathing, "Mia," so softly even he could not hear it.

But Hermione did and now pulled him to her tightly. When they let go, she kissed him on the cheek and sat on the left side of the couch as everyone watched in fascination, with only the girls understanding.

Ginny pushed Gabrielle to him and then sat on the right side, leaving only enough room for him in the middle. Taking the hint, he sat in between the two older girls and pulled Gabrielle into his lap, who snuggled in as best she could. With them settled, the five adults took a seat too. Zoot, the house-elf, brought tea around to everyone. Without exception, a quiet moment was spent sipping and contemplating.

"During the third task," Harry started in an almost normal voice, "I did well, by-passing most of the creatures and traps because of my strategy to fly. However, when I reached the center and the trophy cup, Cedric Diggory showed up at the same time and we grabbed the cup together. It was a Portkey trap, by a Death Eater I presume?" He looked at Sirius.

"Barty Crouch Jr was a convicted one, yes," Sirius confirmed. "I'm sure they'll find that he was the one who caused this."

"The Portkey forced us to travel to a graveyard where two men waited. They tried to kill Cedric with a Killing curse, while I did my best to push him out of the way. I believe that was the moment my ... bond-mates," he said with pride, "chose to come rescue me."

"It shouldn't have been possible because of the wards and that we've never Apparated before, but..." Hermione could not finish.

"We Apparated to Harry and started to defend him, fighting the men," Ginny explained. "Hermione and I against one, and Gabrielle and Harry against the other. They finished their man first and then helped us defeat ours."

"In the process," Harry took the story back, "Gabrielle transformed, for the first time I would guess." She ducked her head down and buried it in Harry chest.

"Gabrielle!" her mother exclaimed with surprise and a hint of pride. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Apolline, it's fine, or at least we're fine with it," Harry assured her to calm her down. "She was magnificent and wonderful and deadly, everything she's supposed to be as my bond-mate ... just like my other two bond-mates," he said with a smile and looked at the other two girls, who returned his smile - although Hermione's was a little more restrained.

Apolline looked her daughter over. "Are you all right? Why didn't you tell me?"

«I'm fine,» she said as she pulled her head out and faced everyone again. «I'm fine and I defended my Harry.»

He squeezed her around the stomach and kissed the top of her head. "After that, we traveled back to Hogwarts where there was lots of

explaining to do. We also found out that Professor Moody was really the Death Eater Crouch, and then we took everyone important back to the graveyard to show them. There, we found a dead Voldemort." He looked at his parents and smiled. "Our project with the Ministry is done and we have no more worries now other than going to a new school in September."

Emma started to cry again, but happily now. Dan almost looked to be tearing up, but he managed to hold it back as he comforted his wife.

"Hermione and Gabrielle stayed at Hogwarts, so when Ginny and I returned from showing where Cedric and I had been taken, we found Gabrielle had gone to the bathroom. However, she wasn't next door as expected."

«It was locked,» Gabrielle said in a small voice.

"If it was locked, then either someone was in there or it was a prank," Ginny said. "You should have gone back to Hermione," she said gently. She said it again in French to make sure the girl understood.

«But I saw the castle and knew a bathroom was there. It wasn't that far away either.»

Harry shook his head and translated for his parents and Sirius. "She said she saw the castle and decided to go there. I felt her become hurt and flew there as fast as I could. When I got there, Draco Malfoy had her in a body-bind. He had captured her and said he was going to sell her."

"No!" Apolline shouted and jumped to her feet partially transforming. Her arms sprouted feathers and a fireball appeared in each hand. "I'll kill him first!"

Feeling an intense pressure, Harry looked over at Dan and Sirius and saw both of them glazing over. "Apolline!" he shouted.

"Apolline!" Jean-Aimé shouted as well, but also grabbed her arms, she shook him off but her fireballs went out in the process. The struggle caused her to really look at her husband and lose her transformation as her rage subsided.

"Apolline!" Harry shouted again. "I took care of it." Slowly, he felt the Veela allure lessen and noticed a look of conscious intelligence return to Dan and Sirius.

Jean-Aimé pulled her back to the couch they had been sitting on and pulled her into an embrace to comfort her as well as calm her down.

"I took care of it," Harry continued when he could. "I sent the girls back and then I Oblivated him."

"That's all you did?" Apolline still was not completely over her anger and it showed by the fiery look in her eyes and the tone of her voice.

"If you'll recall, an Oblivate spell leaves you in a suggestive state for a moment. So I erased the last five minutes of time and told him that his mother had given him instructions that should he fail to get the girl, that he was to meet her in the Forbidden Forest for more instruction and help."

Everyone was looking at him strangely.

Hermione finally said, "You sent him to the Centaurs, didn't you?"

"No..."

Before he could explain, Ginny said gleefully, "You sent Malfoy to the Acromantula."

Except for his parents, every eye went wide when he nodded.

"What's that? Those? Whatever..." Dan asked.

Harry explained with a grin. "Giant spiders that can grow to the size of your car, and their nest contains hundreds of them, and they're wickedly fast."

"Oh my..." Emma gasped.

"I don't know that he did go there, but I put that suggestion in his mind and I saw him walking that direction when I left." He turned to Hermione. "I let Fate decide what happened to him, but he was still very much alive when I last saw him." He saw her acknowledge that with a nod. "After that, we left as I was concerned for our safety. What happened to Fleur and Viktor? I saw them in the tent."

"They're fine now," Apolline said. "Mr Krum was put under the Imperious by the fake Moody and he attacked Fleur. Fortunately, he didn't hurt her very much before she was able to get away, although she passed out a few moments later. She was healed before we left."

Sirius cleared his throat in the ensuing silence. "Fudge was looking for you to give you half of the prize money. Dumbledore wanted to talk to you about something he wouldn't name. And Croaker wanted to have a meeting with you."

Harry sighed. "I guess I'll visit the Ministry tomorrow. Until then, I'm taking a shower and going to bed because I'm so tired. Ladies, meet me in my room when you're ready for a sleeping party." Ginny and Gabrielle giggled and raced for the stairs together, with Gabrielle going more slowly. Harry took a blushing Hermione's hand and led her up as well.

Emma shot Apolline a concerned look, who did not look embarrassed. "They only do it when there are distressed and they know that full pyjamas are required."

(A/N: And thus ends year 4 with everyone not quite as innocent, but with more hope and peace.

I've found it interesting how many people wanted Fleur to join the bond. However, if you go read book4, you'll find that Harry hears Fleur scream, but that's the last mention of her until after the task. Since she didn't get rescued there, I didn't rescue her here. I believe this is a situation where the movie differs from the books, but it's been a while since I've seen the movie.

The story isn't done yet. There are another 3 or so chapters to wrap up loose ends. I should have a better idea how much more there is by the time the next chapter posts.)

Chapter 26 - Clearing the Air

The morning after the Third Task, Harry slowly woke to the feeling of being very warm and a little squished. Opening his eyes, he saw that he was covered in girls and their hair, all clearly visible thanks to his contacts.

As usual, Hermione was stretched out on his left, Ginny molded to him on his right, and Gabrielle curled up half on his left and half draped over his legs with her head resting on his stomach.

Hermione's face was the easiest to see, so he stared at her while she slept. She really was becoming quite pretty, he thought, especially when she was relaxed like this. Looking down, he could see that she was not wearing a bra under the thin top. He admired that part of her for a moment as he considered their relationship; he was also very glad she could not see him watch her as he knew he would be blushing furiously.

They were mostly right again after the strain last night. Eventually, she had understood his need to do what he had done even if she had not liked it. It had helped to tell her that he had not really wanted to kill Malfoy either, but he had to be taught a lesson, as did others. The final nail in Malfoy's coffin, argument-wise, was that if he was willing to sell a girl into sex-slavery at fourteen, what would he be willing to do later in life? Hermione's logical brain understood the question and his reaction; it was her emotions - especially those for protecting him - that got in the way.

It had taken Harry some time as he was lying in bed last night to understand that most of Hermione's objection really came from her desire to prevent him from going to Azkaban, which he appreciated. Now that he had time to think the situation through without being rushed, he supposed he could have taken Malfoy to Director Bones and she probably would have held Malfoy accountable. However, that also would have forced them to depend on the Wizengamot to

find a fourteen/fifteen year-old Pureblood boy guilty when dealing with a Veela, and it also probably would have forced the Veela nation to get involved - all very messy. Hermione was right to be concerned for him, but he was glad he had taken care of the problem.

He was also very glad that was all behind them now.

Harry moved his head slightly and kissed the top of the girl's head. She moved a little against him and Gabrielle, before making an amusing face as she slowly woke. Her brown eyes fluttered open and looked up at him. He smiled at her and kissed her forehead.

Hermione reached up and grabbed her wand to do a breath freshening spell on herself and then him before putting it back. With an impish look that was more commonly found on Ginny, Hermione moved up slightly and kissed him full on the mouth, and it was not a short one either.

"I'm forgiven completely?" he whispered.

"You are," she whispered back. "I think everything was happening too fast and I was too stressed to think it all through before you had to act. Most importantly, you're safe. I'm sorry I put you through that."

He puckered his lips at her and she obliged and stretched to kiss him again.

"No fair," a groggy Gabrielle said as she rolled slightly to get a better look at them kissing.

Hermione broke away from Harry to look at the girl. She smoothed some of the silvery-blond hair back and smiled. "I know it's hard to wait, but one day you can kiss him too. Maybe that will be your thirteenth birthday present, several hours alone with Harry to kiss as much as you want."

Ginny moved and stretched, causing Harry to watch carefully, also noting that she did not have a bra on either. "I think that would be a good fourteenth birthday present too," she said as she turned to look toward the others.

"Oh no!" Harry said softly in mock horror. "Whatever will I do? Having to kiss three pretty girls for hours on end? However will I stand it?"

Gabrielle giggled loudly. Hermione and Ginny looked at one another for a moment before they developed matching grins. Before Harry could protect himself, the two older girls started to tickle him as fast as they could. Gabrielle quickly joined in. Harry tried to tickle back, but three on one made it very difficult to stop them.

After a couple of minutes, a loud knock on the door was heard and the girls stopped, although Harry was still trying to catch his breath. Apolline opened the door and stuck her head inside. "I'm glad to see all of you in such high spirits. If everyone will go to their room and get dressed, you can come down for a late breakfast. There are things we must do today and we must plan for them."

She watched her daughter make a delighted face before crawling up the bed and giving a surprised Harry a peck on the lips before getting out of bed. Her daughter scampered towards her and gave her a hug. «I'm glad you're feeling better, little one, but don't be a tease with Harry; it isn't nice.»

«Yes, Mother,» Gabrielle said as she hurried out the door to her room, the admonition rolling off of her like water off of a duck.

Apolline looked back up to see Hermione giving Harry a sincere kiss and Ginny doing a spell to her mouth. As Hermione climbed out of bed, Ginny kissed Harry good-morning before climbing out. As the girls walked past her, she watched Harry lay in bed for a moment, looking at the ceiling and shaking his head slightly. "Are you going to get up soon, Harry?"

"Yes, but I'm wondering what my life will be like in a few years when I have three girls who all want my time."

The mother looked at him and chuckled. She could easily guess what his godfather would say, but she could not bring herself to say the same thing. Instead, she merely said, "I'm sure you four will figure something out," before she closed the door.

Harry got up and got dressed to start the day. He had taken a shower last night to clean up; all of them had. He hoped there were not any more "messes" to be cleaned up today, as he knew he would have to deal with the Ministry. All done here, he went downstairs while the girls were still dressing.

Hermione and Ginny came out of their rooms at the same time, with Gabrielle a few seconds later. The older girls looked at one another carefully.

"Ginny, did you shrink those jeans on you?" Hermione asked with some concern.

The redhead ran her hands down the side of her hips and thighs. "No, but that's a good idea for next time."

"Ginny!"

"What? I work hard for these hips and legs and if they can help Harry get over what we went through last night, then it's all good." Ginny gave Hermione an appraising look. "Besides, isn't that top way too tight? It has to be at least one size too small."

"It is not!" Hermione huffed. "And Harry likes this blouse; it's his favorite colour."

"You mean he likes the way you fill it out," Ginny smirked.

"Ginny!"

Gabrielle giggled finally, unable to hold it in. "You," she pointed at both of them, "are funny."

Both of the other girls drew a breath in to reply, but slowly let it out when they saw the other's indignant expression. "I'm sorry," they both said simultaneously, causing Gabrielle to giggle again.

"I'm sorry you had to see that, Gabrielle", Hermione said first.

"Me too," Ginny said just as contritely. "We try not to compete, but sometimes it happens anyway."

Hermione nodded. "Even if it's not perfect, the bond definitely helps us get along better." She looked at Ginny again. "They are tight, but you do wear them nicely and I know Harry will appreciate them. I wish I had hips like that."

Ginny stepped forward and gave Hermione a hug. "And I wished I could fill out a blouse like you do. I know Harry will like that."

"I think Harry likes you because he likes you," Gabrielle said with a giggle before starting downstairs.

Hermione and Ginny looked at each other and burst into chuckles.

"Harry is going to be in so much trouble when we all grow up," Hermione said.

"But it will be fun to be a part of it," Ginny agreed, "and I also bet he'll like it." Hermione nodded as they walked downstairs.

Harry sat down at the dining table and saw his godfather giving him a

big grin.

"So, how did you sleep, Harry?"

"Like a rock. I'm still not sure I'm completely rested."

Sirius snorted, although he was still grinning. "We'll, this may wake you up." He tossed a Daily Prophet beside Harry, while Harry prepared his morning tea.

The headlines practically screamed with its tall, bold letters: OLD DEATH EATERS SABOTAGE TOURNAMENT!

He read about the events of last night, surprised that they were mostly correct. As he had expected based on the talk in the graveyard, there was no mention of Voldemort; all the blame had been placed on former Death Eaters. Looking up at his godfather, he asked, "How do you work with them everyday when they hide the truth? There's no mention of Voldemort."

His mother and father looked like they thought that was an interesting question too. Jean-Aimé and Apolline continued to eat without a reaction.

Sirius grabbed another slice of toast and prepared the butter and jam while he answered. "Harry, this is a case where you're both right and wrong. Yes, people should know the truth, and yet, this is a special case where they shouldn't."

"Huh?"

Sirius put the knife down. "Harry, are there still former Death Eaters alive? Are there still people evil enough to become Death Eaters if that were possible?"

"Yes," he answered without hesitation.

"Do you want those people to know that it is possible to cheat death? Do you want more You-Know ... more Voldemorts?"

"Of course not!" When Sirius did not say anything for a moment, Harry finally understood. "Oh, what he did isn't well known so we don't want others to get the idea to do the same."

"Exactly," Sirius said softly with a smile and bit into his toast.

Jean-Aimé took up the education of his son-in-law. "Sometimes leaders have to hide information for the good of the people, to protect them. They call it 'looking at the big picture'. Hopefully, that hiding is done very rarely and after consultation with trusted advisors. I understand your concern and generally agree that hiding information isn't good, but for something like this? I have to agree with Sirius. This should not become common knowledge."

"If it helps," Dan chimed in, "I understand there is information from World War II that the British Government still hasn't declassified and is held in secret. The newspaper said that some of it is due to be released soon; that is, fifty years after the end of the war. So our non-magical government does it too, to protect our people. From what I've heard, I think a good decision was made here too."

Harry nodded. "I suppose..."

"Minister Fudge is corrupt at times and not a very good minister in difficult times, and he made this decision for all the wrong reasons," Sirius told him, "but it is the right decision in the end."

The girls came down, led by Gabrielle. "What do we have to do today?" Hermione asked as the three sat down and started dishing up food.

Harry gave her a long look, appreciating how she was dressed.

When Ginny stood back up to reached over the table for the plate of bacon before she sat down, he noticed her figure too. Each of them made his blood race a little faster. Sirius's voice broke him out of his pleasant thoughts.

"Because we left so quickly last night and everything was so chaotic, we have to be at a ceremony at the Ministry at one this afternoon, or so the letter I received this morning indicated. Mr Croaker has also requested a meeting this afternoon, as soon after the ceremony as you can get free."

Hermione nodded an acknowledgement before looking at her parents. "Sirius, since it's Sunday and my parents have the day off, could they put on the robes we bought for them and come too?" She was pleased to see her parents sit up and look very interested.

"I don't see why not. Harry can take Dan via the Floo and you can take your mother," he told her. "I can wait with them in the Atrium while you have your other meeting." He looked at Dan and Emma, "That's as long as you want to go."

"Yes, we'd love to," Emma said.

"Absolutely. I'd like to see Harry get his award and what the Ministry of Magic looks like," Dan said with pride. Harry blushed at their pleased look.

"We will meet you there at one," Jean-Aimé told them. "Beauxbatons is due to leave at noon, so we thought we'd leave shortly to tell Fleur good-bye until she returns home and good luck on her NEWTs, which start tomorrow."

"Then back here for the afternoon and dinner before the kids go to the Grangers afterwards. We have a plan," Sirius said with a grin.

Harry sat on the short stage barely maintaining his fake smile, as small as it was. Looking out among the audience, he saw his "family". Gabrielle and Ginny looked bored, as did Sirius, Jean-Aimé, and Apolline. Hermione managed to look somewhat interested for real, as did her parents - although all three were looking around more than they were at Minister Fudge.

Fudge kept going on and on to the point that Harry wondered if the man would ever shut up.

Amazingly, Cedric was there, although he looked quite pale. Harry wondered how the Hufflepuff was able to get away from Madam Pomfrey's care, but one look at the Diggorys solved that puzzle. Amos Diggory was practically glowing in pride, and his wife looked almost as thrilled. Cho Chang was standing next to them and looked very happy too.

"And so, I present to you the co-winners of the Triwizard Tournament, who receive 500 Galleons each: Cedric Diggory and Harry Potter from Hogwarts." Fudge waved them forward as the small crowd cheered. The minister handed them each a sack. The camera flashes started from the numerous reporters and Harry hoped none of the flashes of light were a spell because he was all but blinded.

As the ceremony ended, without them having to say anything, Harry realized nothing was said about Voldemort here either. Sirius's explanation made a lot of sense, but Harry still was not happy with Fudge.

"Harry, thank you for saving my life," Cedric told him as he held out his hand.

When Harry shook it, several cameras went off. "I'm glad you lived." He smirked slightly. "In fact, you're welcome to the title of 'The Boy Who Lived'."

Cedric chuckled. "I'm not sure I want it." Cho came up and stood next to him. He put his arm around her shoulders and physically leaned on her. "Now that I've been in a Harry Potter adventure, I believe I've had enough excitement."

"You have," Cho added quickly. She looked at Harry very sincerely. "Thank you from me too for saving him."

Harry blushed a little at the praise and nodded. "I'm only sorry I couldn't have prevented you from getting hit and losing your fingers."

Cedric held up his bandaged hand as if to examine it. "Harry, if you hadn't shoved me out of the way, the Killing Curse would have hit me in the body and killed me. So, losing two fingers is a small price to pay to continue living."

"I understand," Harry said soberly. "but still..."

"Besides, they told me you made sure they would never hurt anyone again."

Harry agreed, but did not know what to say that would not sound rude or conceited. He was saved from having to think up an answer by Hermione coming over.

"Croaker is waiting for us over by the elevator," she whispered in his ear. "I'll come with you while Ginny and Gabrielle wait up here with everyone else."

"I'm sorry, but Hermione says someone is waiting to talk to us. Cedric, congratulations." Harry shook hands with him again. "Cho, good luck with Quidditch and Cedric." The girl blushed as Cedric told them good-bye.

While they walked through the dissipating crowd, Hermione softly said, "I would expect them to ask to see your memory. If so, I think a

good explanation for Gabrielle would be that she grabbed Ginny's hand and was pulled along in our accidental magic to get to you. Make the memory only from when the Portkey took you until the last Death Eater went down. That will hide our conversation."

He nodded as it seemed reasonable.

Croaker was indeed by the elevators, as was Madam Bones. They were holding one of the elevators, so it was only for them.

Unfortunately, Albus Dumbledore also strode over as they arrived. "Mr Potter..."

Harry stiffened slightly and gripped Hermione's hand a little tighter. "Professor," he said coolly. He had not wanted to talk to the man, but he did his best to paste a neutral look on his face.

"I was hoping we could have a word about something important. Also, perhaps we could have an impromptu meeting about our project and how we'll continue it?" Dumbledore suggested.

Before Croaker could say anything, Harry answered. "I'm sorry Professor, but this is a private meeting between us and I really don't have any free time for you today. As for our project, from what I saw last night, it is complete." He wondered what the old man wanted this time and why he thought the project needed to continue, but he was not curious enough to talk to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore looked thoughtful for a moment after the brush-off. "I have something very important to tell you, Mr Potter, and it would be well worth your time. I also believe there is one more obstacle to take care of before the project is complete. In fact, the important news I have to tell you concerns the project."

"As we will soon not be in the country, I would suggest you give your important news about the project to Mr Croaker." He gave Croaker a

small smile of apology, while Croaker looked more amused than anything. Bones seemed to be pretending she was not present.

"The news is for you alone, Mr Potter, and it is very important."

Harry thought he now had a good idea as to what Dumbledore was talking about, and if he was right, it no longer mattered. Trying not to look as exasperated as he felt, Harry said, "I've asked you some important questions several times in the past and you told me to trust you and wait. You had your chance to influence me, Professor. I'm through asking because I no longer care. Keep your secrets, Professor, I have a life to live. If you'll excuse me, I have a meeting and then other plans." He knew he was being slightly rude, but he really did not care this once.

Dumbledore looked a little shock at Harry's words and then perturbed, but he let it go for the moment. "One last thing, Mr Potter. Mr Malfoy is missing. Would you know where he is?"

Harry was surprised to be asked that, and a little concerned, but he pushed his feelings aside. "I don't see how it's any of my concern if you've lost a student, Professor. In fact, I would think Director Bones would be a much better person to ask for help." A glance showed the Director to be very interested.

"When did you discover Mr Malfoy was missing?" Bones asked, scrutinizing the old man carefully.

"I was merely hoping that Mr Potter had seen him last night, or perhaps talked to him, since the two have a history," Dumbledore dodged.

Bones was not to be fooled. "I'll be at the school in an hour, Headmaster. I suggest you have everyone who has information on this case be readily available."

While Dumbledore was having a mini-staring contest with the Director, Harry led Hermione into the waiting elevator. Croaker and Bones followed, closing the door and leaving Dumbledore behind.

"Miss Weasley won't be joining us like last time?" Croaker asked as they traveled, not mentioning the amusing exchange he had just witnessed.

"She's visiting with her father," Hermione supplied smoothly, which was the truth. Arthur had been at the ceremony and had come over to talk to his daughter. "We'll fill her in later."

"Of course." Croaker led them to his office.

Croaker opened his safe while Amelia Bones locked the door and conjured a couple of chairs. He started setting objects on the desk: a destroyed diary, a ring with a burnt band, a twisted locket, a cracked ceramic cup, and a slightly burnt tiara. Lastly, he moved a small Pensieve from a shelf to his desk as well. "Mr Potter, would you be so kind as to think of your time in the graveyard last night so that I can make a copy of the memory for us to view?"

"Err, sure." He did his best to think of the timeframe that Hermione had suggested and Croaker used his wand to take a copy of the memory and put it in the Pensieve. They watched a display of the memory above the stone bowl; it stopped as the last Death Eater had fallen and before he had grabbed a transformed Gabrielle in a tight hug.

When it finished, Madam Bones looked at him. "Why was the girl there, who I suspect is Miss Delacour's younger sister based on the looks and the fact that she transformed like a Veela? Also, why did she refer to you as 'my Harry'?"

Harry was surprised she had caught Gabrielle saying that. He had, but only because he was listening for her to say it. "Well, it's a little

embarrassing..." He was a little red and not sure how to explain it, despite Hermione's tip.

Fortunately, Hermione jumped in. "Ginny and I wanted to help Harry so badly that we did accidental magic to go to him. Gabrielle, who is Fleur Delacour's little sister, grabbed Ginny's hand and went along. If you remember, Harry saved her in the second task and that caused her to develop a severe crush and fixation on Harry. Her parents are stilling trying to fully understand it and help her ... and Harry." With a shrug, she added, "She tries to go everywhere Harry does."

Harry thought that was an artful half truth and dodge, and he was impressed Hermione could say that with a straight face. That was more of a Ginny response, making him wonder if the two had discussed it sometime this morning when he was not around. He was also somewhat surprised the adults seemed to accept the explanation. Perhaps this sort of thing had happened before in the world of magic. They not knowing where he had been living for the last few months probably helped too.

"Do you mean to say that you three Apparated through the Hogwarts wards, at the ages of fifteen, thirteen, and ten or eleven?" Croaker asked with incredulousness. Bones had a similar expression.

Hermione shrugged. "I can't really say exactly how we did it. We just wished very hard to be with Harry so that we could help him and we ... went." The loud cracking sound in the memory when they arrived had been very noticeable, and there really was not any other explanation other than Apparating. She wondered if they would be fined for that or not.

Bones and Croaker shared a look. "I have heard of children Apparating accidentally before, but never through wards," she commented.

"Same here, but I've never heard of three trying simultaneously and

one of them being a Veela." He picked up a quill and wrote himself a note. "I believe we have a new research project for when we have time and can find a Veela to help us." When he finished, he used the end of the quill as a pointer to poke at the objects. "As you can see, here are the soul containers we found and destroyed. I'm sure you can see that there are only five and I expected to find six, yet there is no denying that the Dark Wizard Riddle has been banished from life. That is the only reason for the Dark Mark to have disappeared from the forearms of his living followers. So where is the missing container? Do you have any clue, Mr Potter or Miss Granger?"

They looked at each other and shrugged. "I'm not sure I can say," Harry said. "I did kill that snake, perhaps it was one?" He really did not want to discuss the connection Grand-ma-ma had severed, and his girls had agreed with that decision when they had discussed it soon after the connection had been broken.

Croaker leaned back in his chair. "Perhaps, but if so, then that was the stupidest thing Riddle has ever done. All parts of animals are replaced over time, so given enough time, any soul fragment would have dissipated as the 'container' was destroyed by the body and replaced. No, I believe it must have been something else."

"Perhaps there was another, but someone else destroyed it," Hermione suggested.

Croaker looked at Bones for a moment. "That is the best guess for now. If you remember, we said that the locket had been found and moved by Sirius Black's brother. Another case like that would explain the missing item."

"Does it really matter, as long as the deed is done?" Bones asked.

"Not for you, but I live to solve mysteries," the head Unspeakable said with a knowing smile. He looked at Harry now. "Mr Potter, in my professional opinion, I believe the Prophecy has been fulfilled and so

I wish you a long and happy life. I will also give you a gift if you two will do me a small favor."

"What?" Harry asked warily.

"If you and Miss Granger will promise to come see me soon after you finish school," he picked up the ring and put it in front of Harry, "then this is yours. You don't have to promise to work for me, just promise to come spend an afternoon and talk to me about working here in some capacity."

Hermione was staring at the ring with the deep amber stone embedded in it. "What is it, other than a ring?"

Croaker smiled. "It is an heirloom that I probably should keep because of its historical significance. However, I know that it was originally owned by the Peverell family, of which the Potters are descended and I'm unaware of any other living family in that line. I give it to you to show you the sort of things we work with here and as a show of good faith that I really do want to talk with you in the future."

"You want to give me an old ring now that was once owned by my ancestors, and in return we only have to come talk to you in the future?" Harry asked, looking for any catch.

"Correct." Croaker smiled at them. "There are two more reasons to give you the ring, if you'd like to know." At Harry's nod, he said, "The second reason is that the four of you, and you especially Mr Potter, deserve an Order of Merlin for what you did. However, with Fudge in charge, you'll never be awarded it so that ring could be your reward for your brave deed, not to mention compensation for past deeds against your family."

"That's all right," Harry replied more happily than the adults expected. "I don't really want the attention an Order of Merlin would bring."

What's the other reason?"

"The third reason is because I consider the ring to be a test. If you can tell me about it when you come visit in three years, then that will tell me a little more about you and your abilities." Croaker waited to see if the girl would take the bait, and she did.

"There's a mystery about it?" Hermione softly asked, looking at it more intensely than before, being careful not to touch it.

"I believe it's safe to say that. Also, please keep it hidden so that only you and those you can trust not to talk about it know - the fewer the better," he told the students.

Harry looked at Hermione, who said, "I don't think I have a problem with the deal." She stopped and looked up at Croaker. "It can't hurt us, can it?"

"Not directly. It could cause some emotional stress if you abuse it, but if you work with it as a team, I don't foresee any real problems." Croaker picked up the ring and put it on for a few seconds before pulling it back off and setting it back on the desk. "See, no harm."

Harry slowly reached out and picked it up. It felt only like a heavy ring. He put it on and nothing bad happened, although he did feel a slightly unusual warmth from it. He pulled it off and put it into a pocket. "We'll contact you in three years."

"Wonderful. Amelia, do you have anything to add?" Croaker looked very delighted.

"To elaborate on last night... There are no charges against any of you. Also, we know we can't force you to silence, but we do request you don't tell anyone about Tom Riddle's death last night. I'm sure that sounds strange, but we don't want anyone else trying to extend their life in the same way." She looked at them expectantly.

"I understand," Harry said while Hermione nodded her agreement. "I'll tell Ginny and Gabrielle too."

"Thank you, Mr Potter. Unless you have any questions for us, I believe we're done." They had none and Amelia Bones led them back up to the Atrium, where they were relieved not to find Albus Dumbledore waiting for them.

They bid her good-bye and walked over to their parents and godfather. Mr Weasley was still there.

"Harry, it's jolly good to see you doing so well. Congratulations on your win."

"Thank you, Arthur. I hope you're doing well." Harry looked at Gabrielle, who seemed to be straining to hold herself back from him. He gave her smile before he turned back to Ginny's father. "If you'll excuse us, I think it's time for us to go."

Arthur gave Ginny a hug and then shook hands with the men around him, ending with Harry, before he left for home. The group returned to Sirius's house for time together and then for dinner.

After dinner, Jean-Aimé and Apolline bid the children good-bye for the next week, leaving for a week-long holiday in Crete. Dan and Emma loaded the four children into their car and drove home.

In the Granger house, the parents sat the children down in the living room.

"We believe we need to put a few rules in place as things have changed since the last time you were home," Dan said to them, standing in front of the fireplace while the children sat on the sofa and Emma in a chair.

"We've done some rearranging and there are now some bunk beds in Hermione's room in addition to her bed."

That statement caused Hermione to look at him sharply.

"That means that all three of you girls will sleep in there. Harry, you'll still be in your bedroom. In this house, the girls sleep in one room and Harry will be in his. While we understand about last night and that it wasn't the first time you've done that, we are uncomfortable with that sleeping arrangement here and we ask that you honor our wishes in this."

"We understand," Emma said, "that we can't really force you to do this when you're not here; however, please do as we ask while staying in our house."

Harry was surprised and yet he was not. He looked at Hermione, who was looking at him.

"Yes, Dad," Hermione said after a moment. "We've only done it a few times and only after traumatic experiences for comfort. I don't really expect any of that while we're here."

"I'll agree too," Harry added.

"Me too," Ginny told them.

"I ... understand," Gabrielle said, although she did not look happy about it.

Dan looked relieved the restriction had been accepted so easily. "Very good. Rule two is closely related to rule one. No closed doors except for the bathroom or if someone is changing clothes. Harry, no closed doors for you unless you are alone."

"Yes, sir," Harry said. The girls agreed as well.

"Rule three, please tell us in person or on the phone if you plan to leave the house before you go ... unless it's an emergency that causes you to leave for your safety. If that happens, the small silver goblet that is the Portkey to the Delacours is here on the mantel behind me."

Harry and the girls agreed to that.

"Rule four, please understand that while we have to work mornings this week, we have scheduled the afternoons so that we are free and we want to spend time with you. We also want you to have some fun," Dan said with a smile, drawing smiles from the kids. "Tomorrow, make a list of some things you'd like to do and we'll discuss which of them we can do. Go ahead and unpack and the rest of the evening is yours."

"Exercise at half past six?" Emma asked hopefully.

"Yes!" Ginny exclaimed, drawing chuckles. The other three agreed, with Hermione surprising her mother.

As they started to leave, Dan motioned for Harry to stay behind. When it was just the three of them, Dan put his arm on Harry's shoulder in a companionable fashion. "Harry, I'm sorry to have to put those rules on you, but we feel much more comfortable with them as all of you grow into your later teen years. We understand your status, but it's a little difficult for us."

"It's all right, we understand. We really don't have all that much alone time at the Delacours either."

"You're about to be fifteen, Harry, and I can remember the fascination I had with girls at that age," Dan told him with a penetrating look and wry smile. "I hope you can keep to your plan that you told us earlier this year about waiting as long as you can before sex. I believe it will

benefit all of you to build the companion relationships first, especially with a younger girl as part of your family."

Harry's face felt very warm right now. "I understand. I've been very careful with Gabrielle and I'll be that way for a long time."

"I'm proud of you," his father said, and his mother looked equally proud. "I'll mention one other thing before I let you go up. Now that it looks like your family is stable, and I hope there aren't any more additions..."

"Me too," Harry interjected wistfully, causing his parents to smile at him.

"I would suggest you talk to Sirius to find out how you can create a Last Will and Testament. Since you're technically married and have a great deal of wealth, it's something you should do while you're here this week."

"I already have a simple one that includes Hermione and Ginny," Harry replied, "but you're right that I need to add Gabrielle. I'll talk to Sirius about it tomorrow."

"We're here for you too, if you have general questions," Emma told him. "We'd also recommend that the girls have one too."

"Thanks for the advice, Mum." Harry gave both of parents a hug and went upstairs.

As he enlarged his trunk, Hermione came into his room. "What did Mum and Dad want to talk about?"

"Oh, they just told me that they were sorry about the rules and hoped I understood why they did it. They also mentioned that I should probably add Gabrielle to my Last Will." He watched her nod as she thought it through.

He waved her over to where he was and she walked over with a puzzled look. He pulled her over to the corner of the room and mostly out of sight from the door. "I thought you looked very nice today," he said as he pulled her into a hug, hands on her sides and then on her back, caressing her slowly. She put her arms around his shoulders and leaned in for a kiss, which they spent several minutes doing. When they finished, they rested foreheads against each other and grinned for a moment.

"What about the ring?" Hermione asked as she stepped back.

"We can talk about it tomorrow when it's just the four of us. Good night, Hermione." He patted her on the bum to send her on her way. "Will you send the others over one at a time too?"

She gave him a surprised look for his action, before it melted into a grin and she walked out.

He put some of his things in the closet before Ginny came into his room.

"Hermione said you wanted to tell me something?"

Harry grabbed her hand and pulled her to the corner too, wrapping her in a hug followed by a passionate kiss. When he finished a few minutes later, his hands slid down to her bum and caressed her there. "Have I told you how wonderful you looked today?"

Ginny got an impish look. "No, but feel free to express yourself."

Harry grinned and chuckled at her phrasing before he kissed her again, but it was only a short one this time. "Good night, Gin."

"Night, Harry."

He barely started to unpack again before Gabrielle came running into the room. Harry laughed lightly as he scooped her up and carried her to his bed, where he sat down and put her in his lap, noticing that she took more of his lap than just four months ago. He gave her a tight hug for a long moment, which she returned.

«Ginny gave me the top bed,» she said excitedly.

«I'm happy for you and you can show me tomorrow.»

She threw her arms around him again for another hug, before kissing him on the cheek and giggling as she hopped off his lap and ran back to the girls' room.

That made him smile. He also considered that maybe his and Hermione's attempts to convince her to wait for real kissing were starting to work.

Taking a few more minutes to unpack, he heard his mother knock on his doorframe as he finished. "Since I heard running, I assume everyone's said good-night?"

Harry blushed slight. "Uh, yeah."

She smiled at him. "Please be careful, Harry. I know you'll be married some day, but be careful in the meantime. Girls can be fragile, especially with emotions. Good-night."

"Night, Mum." He supposed she meant accidentally, because he would never intentionally hurt any of them.

The next morning, Emma was amazed that all four of her children, as she thought of them, came down and did exercises. Hermione surprised her the most because Hermione had never liked doing them, plus she also kept up the pace with the others too. When Emma's time was done, they surprised her again by heading out the

front door and going for a jog around the block.

They returned after Emma had taken a shower and readied herself for work. While they cleaned up, she made breakfast for everyone. She and Dan then left for work, and let the kids eat and clean up on their own.

Since they were alone, Harry pulled out his new ring while they all sat around the table. "This is what Croaker gave me." He showed it to them while he told what little he knew.

When the ring was handed to Ginny, she looked at it carefully, just as Hermione had. Turning it over in her hand to look at all of it, she suddenly saw a symbol with a triangle, circle, and line on it. "I've seen this symbol before somewhere," she said excitedly as she pointed to it.

Hermione grabbed it back from her to look at it intently. "I don't recognize it," she said with disappointment.

Gabrielle took the ring from her and looked at it, especially at the symbol. "I have not seen it before. Maybe it is only English?"

Hermione pulled out her little notebook and pen, drawing the symbol in there. "At least we have something to investigate."

"I bet that's what Croaker wanted you to find and figure out," Ginny suggested.

"Except that he sounded like he knew what it was already." Hermione looked at her notebook, turning it a little every few seconds, in case a different angle triggered a memory. "You don't remember where, Ginny?"

"No," the redhead answered with the same disappointment. "I'm reasonably sure it wasn't my school books, or you'd have recognized

it too. So that means it was one of my other books, one of my books for fun."

"Or maybe something you saw at home as you grew up?" Hermione asked.

Ginny nodded. "Possibly. We'll just have to keep our eyes open for it."

"All right, that project is on hold for the moment," Hermione said as she flipped to a blank page in her notebook. "What do we want to do this week?"

They talked about things to do for a while. Harry wrote a letter to Sirius about coming over tomorrow morning and sent it with Archimedes, the Granger's owl. The rest of the morning was spent doing fun personal projects: Hermione reading some things she had been putting off, Ginny and Gabrielle gossiping, and Harry planning what he might need in a Will and other things that needed to be done this summer.

Dan and Emma came home for a late lunch and then took the kids out for a fun time in London for the rest of the day.

At Hogwarts, a letter was being written during a free period, which was sent out that evening.

In the second highest tower, an old man pondered the status of the present world and two adversaries: one deadly and one lost ally. None of his little silver instruments told him anything useful. There was one way to interpret that reading - and it was the preferred interpretation - but it gave him no comfort as he was not sure he could trust the reading as the interpretation did not match what he knew. Sure, Harry's scar had lightened from the glimpse he had struggled to see without being observed doing so, but the scar still existed which must mean it was active. By dinner time, he still had no

revelation about what to do.

The next morning, Sirius arrived at the Granger's house just before Dan and Emma left for work. "If you don't mind, I'd like to take them to Diagon Alley this morning, and then probably again later this week. The bank can help us understand what needs to be in Harry's Will, and then we'll have to file it with them later after it's written."

"I don't think that's a problem, at least as long as you have them back by one. We had planned to go to the zoo later today. You're welcome to come along," Dan told him.

"I'd love to. We'll see you then." Sirius started Side-Along Apparating the children to his house, and then they used the Floo to go to Diagon Alley, as he felt that was safer.

"I'm glad we're here," Hermione said. "I found something in my reading yesterday that I want to look up."

"You mean I have to buy you another book?" Harry asked in jest.

"No, it's at Gringotts, but maybe I should have you buy me one anyway for that remark." She held her upset look for almost ten seconds before she cracked and started to chuckle at Harry's distressed look.

"Good one, Hermione", Ginny said teasingly. "You had him going and he should get you a book as a reward for the tease."

"You don't have to Harry," Hermione relented, "but there is something in your vault we need to look for."

"What?"

"You'll see," she said sweetly as they approached the bank.

"Witch," Harry muttered, causing the girls and Sirius to chuckle.

Sirius took them into the bank. They got a few interesting looks, since they were school age but Hogwarts was not out yet; however, no one said anything to them.

They walked up to an open teller and Sirius cleared his throat lightly to get the goblin's attention. "What do you need?" the goblin asked surly.

"We need to speak to someone about filling out a Last Will," Sirius said.

The goblin pointed to a side wall. "The Ministry forms are over there. Get what you need and send it to the Ministry. Now, do you have any Gringotts business?"

Sirius looked puzzled. "When I created mine, Gringotts helped me and I filed it here."

"Laws have changed, Wizard," the goblins said, not friendly at all. "All Gringotts does now is store them at your request, and that's what personal vaults are for. Do you have any real business?"

"Yes," Harry spoke up quickly, eager to get away from this goblin. "We need to visit the Potter family vault."

The goblin rang a small bell, causing another goblin to walk over. "Go with him," the teller told them and returned to working on the large book in front of him.

Harry led the way, with Hermione practically jumping to be by his side.

"Can I please sit next to you?" the brunette asked.

"Sure," Harry replied, guiding her into the cart to travel to his vault, then slipping in beside her. The other girls sat with him, forcing Sirius to sit in the front next to the goblin driver. As the cart took off, he felt Hermione throw her arms around him and hang on for dear life. He was pleasantly surprised that she did not shriek like last time they rode the bank cart; she only buried her face in the crook of his neck and squeezed him so tightly he had trouble breathing at times. Harry noticed that Gabrielle and Ginny thoroughly enjoyed the ride.

When they arrived at the vault, Harry had to peel Hermione from him and help her out. She held his hand tightly - still recovering from the ride - as they approached the vault. It opened, and again there was a hazy film over the doorway, although it again did not stop them from entering the vault.

"What are we looking for, Hermione?" he asked. The others gave her their attention also.

She took a deep breath and then started to explain. "I finally finished looking through all the papers yesterday that I copied from here during our first visit. For most of the shorter documents, I copied them in their entirety. But I only copied the first page for the longer ones. One of the longer ones mentioned the Potter ancestral home, but it didn't mention where it was. I'd like to find that document."

Harry looked at his godfather. "Sirius, why haven't you mentioned that to me before now?"

Sirius appeared to be deep in thought, making some interesting faces while doing so. "I'm sorry, Harry, but I'm having trouble remembering it. It seems like I should know as I can now remember there being one after she mentioned it, but I can't remember where it was or what it was like."

"I bet the property has some sort of enchantment on it so non-family members have trouble remembering it - for protection," Hermione

theorized.

"That would make sense," Sirius easily agreed, "and I know that sort of thing is possible. Still, you'd think..." He suddenly stopped and groaned. "Of course! I probably did know, but James's death probably triggered some magic to block the memories." He looked at Harry. "If so, the document Hermione mentioned will probably tell you how to inform other people, or at the very least it will lead you to the property where you'll find instructions."

"Right." Harry walked over to the shelves and started grabbing the boxes and handing one to each person. "Hermione, show everyone the first page that you copied so we know what we're looking for."

Even with five of them searching, it took almost ten minutes to find the document.

"Got it!" Harry yelled.

Hermione rushed over and pulled her wand out, duplicating the entire document this time. Sirius read over Harry's shoulder while the girls all read Hermione's copy.

On page three, Harry pointed at the doc. "Do you recognize this address, Sirius?"

"Yeah, that's vaguely familiar. That's in northern Wales, and it is known that the Potters came from Wales. We have some time this morning if you want to go check it out."

Harry looked at the girls and got three enthusiastic looks. "Yes, I think that'd be brilliant. Let me get some money and then we can go." Harry started to fill his money bag.

"If you want to carry a little more, grab some of the platinum ones over there on the side," Sirius suggested.

"What?" Harry and Hermione asked in tandem.

"Why haven't I heard of those before," Hermione continued, looking affronted as if Sirius had purposefully withheld the information from her.

"Because they're rarely used by most of us." It was Ginny who had answered. "How many students do you know that need to carry hundreds or thousands of Galleons around with them?" She walked over and picked up a handful, looking at one closely as she came back and handed the rest to Harry and Hermione. "Actually, I never expected to ever see one of these, much less hold one." She finally handed hers to Gabrielle to inspect.

"So they're platinum. What are they worth and what are they called?" Hermione asked.

"They're called Claymores and are worth one hundred and one Galleons each. You won't see many of them because they're normally only used for large purchases; but if you plan to do that, they are useful to make your money bag lighter."

"Cool." Harry dropped ten of those in his bag, plus a number of Galleons along with some Sickles and a few Knuts. "I'm ready."

They all returned to the lobby of the bank and Harry grabbed four of the forms to make a Last Will. Sirius took them out to a side-street that was not too busy before he called the Knight Bus.

When the bus pulled up, the conductor stepped out. "Welcome to the Knight Bus, the emergency transport for... Oh, it's you again." The man looked at Harry with derision. "So, you are going to tell me you have another emergency that comes first and that Dumbledore will be paying for this trip too?"

"No, I'll be paying for the trip now, for all five of us," Harry said, throwing a little of the man's attitude back at him. He motioned his bond-mates to start boarding.

"We're going to 45 Broad Glyn Road, which I believe is a little east of Pennant if I understood what I read," Hermione said as she boarded.

The conductor, Robert, looked at the driver, Frank. Frank thought about it for a moment. "Call it one Galleon and two Sickles each."

Harry dug into his money bag and handed the correct change over before he boarded last. He barely made it to an armchair before the bus shot forward. Fortunately, it was a slow day and they were the second stop. They were deposited at the edge of a valley in the middle some large hills in what looked like the middle of nowhere.

As the bus left with a bang, Harry looked at Sirius. "Does any of this look familiar to you?"

Sirius took a slow look around, as did the girls. "Yeah," he answered, "being here helps me to remember. That way, I think." He took off walking with the others following.

Gabrielle hurried over and grabbed Harry's hand, giving him a pleased smile. He squeezed her hand and gave her a loving look, before they started to look around for any sign of the Potter home.

When they rounded a bend in the road a few minutes later, Ginny pointed and shouted. "Look! A post box!" They hurried over and found a faded "45" on the side.

"Yes, that looks right. Hmm..." Sirius frowned. "I'd swear there was a path near here, but if no one has been here for years, it's probably grown over."

"So we just start walking until we find some wards?" Hermione

asked.

"Duh! Of course!" Harry pulled out his wand and silently cast the Magic Sight spell he had learned when trying to find Malfoy Manor. Just past an old rotting fence was a wall of magic that almost blinded him by looking at it, even in the mid-morning light. "Ow!" He hastily turned away.

"Harry!" Gabrielle rushed around him to look at his face.

"I'm fine, other than being stupid," he said after he cancelled the spell.

"What did you do?" Sirius asked, concerned as he came over with the other girls.

"I cast Magic Sight while looking at strong magic. There is a wall of magic just past that fence. I would assume that's the property's wards." Harry shook head again, blinking furiously for a moment. "Let's try walking that way."

With his wand still out, just in case, Harry walked towards a break in the fence. They walked single file now, with Sirius taking the end position. Harry carefully stepped through the break and then took two more steps. On the third step, he felt like he was trying to move through a wall of water. One more step moved him past the last of the wards, allowing him to see the Potter ancestral home in the distance for the first time.

"That's impressive," Ginny quietly commented, having come in next.

"I'll see you later," Sirius said suddenly. "I have to be somewhere else in a few minutes."

Harry twirled around quickly. "Sirius, stop! Hermione, grab his arm." He ran back towards the road to help Hermione.

"Harry, I really do need to go. You should be coming too." Sirius sounded confused.

"Sirius, it's the wards. You have to follow us."

"Wards?"

Harry felt frustrated.

"We need to pull him in," Hermione told him. "Grab his other arm, Harry. Sirius, let us lead you."

"But..."

"Come on, and don't fight us." Harry pulled him along, as did Hermione.

It took some pulling and pushing, but as soon as he was through the wards, Sirius settled down, his confusion forgotten. "Right, there's the house you want, Harry. Come on. I'm starting to remember and I think you'll like it." Sirius now led the way, causing Harry and Hermione to share an amused look.

"Those must be good wards," Harry commented as he grabbed Hermione's hand to walk with her.

"I agree, but I'm more interested in the fact that the three of us had no problems following you. I think it must be our bond, like we could mimic your magic on the door to our training room at Hogwarts."

"Or maybe the magic understands our bond and sees you three as my wives?" he asked with a grin.

She grinned back. "Perhaps that too."

As they walked through the field of knee-high grass, Ginny walked beside Hermione. "Do you think it's as big as the Delacour's house? I think it's close."

"Maybe," Gabrielle agreed. "We need to see the back first."

Sirius walked up to the front door, but found it locked. "You try it Harry. It may require a Potter to open it."

"I don't have a key though."

"Try it anyway," Sirius encouraged him. "It's probably like your vault. Most of the other houses the Black Family owns are the same way."

Harry found the door locked for him too, but the basic unlocking charm while he was touching it with his other hand opened the lock. The door creaked as he pushed it open. With his wand lit to give him more light, he cautiously walked in. The entry hall was not quite as nice as the Delacour's, but that may have been because it was covered in dust with some cobwebs stretched in places. The others walked in, but they left the door open behind them for more light.

"I guess no one has been here since my parents," Harry said a little sadly. "I'm not sure who I was hoping for, but..."

"It's all right, Harry," Ginny said comfortingly as she snaked an arm around his waist. She also pulled out her wand and lit it. Together, the two walked forward, ducking under a cobweb in the doorway.

"The parlor," Sirius informed them as he held his lit wand high to look at the room. It was dusty as well, and the furniture was covered with white sheets. "That's the only public accessible Floo," he said, pointing to the fireplace. "There was an access list on it, but I'm reasonably sure it was the only one connected to the Floo Network. You'll notice the heavy doors across the room along with a pull rope for a bell. Those doors were usually locked to separate this room

from the rest of the house."

"Sirius? Did my ... family have house-elves?" Harry noticed his question drew a less than pleased look from Hermione. He knew she understood how the elves needed wizards, but he also knew she still did not like that relationship because she felt it was so one-sided.

"Yes, two. I'd guess they were freed when your parents died, as the bond would have broken."

"Then how did all the furniture get covered?" Ginny asked.

Sirius shrugged. "I'd guess the elves did that as their last task before they left, or maybe when your parents went into hiding. And no, I don't know where the elves would have gone."

Harry opened the heavy double doors to show a wide hallway. "Sirius, do you think Zoot would come if you called her? I have a question for her."

"Here?" Sirius considered it. "I can try. Zoot!" he said firmly and did a quick double-clap.

A second later, there was a pop and Sirius's elf stood in front of them. "Did Master call?"

"Harry has a question for you..."

Harry knelt down on one knee. "Zoot, two years ago a house-elf that used to belong to the Malfoys was set free. His name was Dobby. Do you know who he is and if he is still free?"

She thought for a moment. "I have heard of a free elf, but I don't know if he is the same one. I could find out." Zoot looked to Sirius.

"Please go find out and return to this house to find me when you

know." Sirius reinforced the command. Zoot nodded and popped out.

"I really wished you wouldn't, Harry," Hermione told him, "but I do understand that we do need the help."

"He has no choice," Gabrielle said. "I want to find the bedrooms." She grabbed Harry's hand and started leading him into the rest of the house. The doors they passed were closed and they did not open them.

"I vaguely recall them being up the stairs, Harry," Sirius told him.

The first floor held two bedrooms on each side of the hallway that were almost alike, except for colors. The girls all thought they could live in one of them. The double doors at the end of the hallway led to what was obviously the master bedroom. Ignoring the dust, the large bedroom was obviously well furnished. Its ensuite bathroom was lavish compared to the small bathrooms in each of the smaller bedrooms. Hermione and Ginny looked at each other and giggled quietly with large grins when they saw the large tub.

"I could definitely live here," Harry said with an impressed tone as he walked out of one of two large walk-in closets he had been investigating.

Before they left the master bedroom, there were two popping sounds and two elves stood in front of them. "Zoot has found Dobby working at Hogwarts and he is still free."

Harry looked at the elf who had visited him back in his second year at school. He looked as pitiful as the dirty pillowcase he wore. Harry wondered if the little guy had been sick for a long time or something. He dropped to one knee. "Dobby, do you remember me?"

Dobby perked up some. "Dobby could never forget the great Harry Potter. Harry Potter has saved us all from the Dark One after Dobby

warned Harry Potter." The large and very sad eyes looked up at Harry. "Harry Potter has saved me from bad and evil Masters." He looked back down.

Harry looked at Sirius, who shook his head to show he had no idea what was going on. Looks to his bond-mates gave him no more information, other than Hermione looking very concerned. "Dobby, what's wrong? You don't look so good," but the elf did not answer. He looked at the other elf. "Zoot, what's wrong with him?"

Zoot looked very uncomfortable, but she finally said, "He's almost ... dead."

"What? Why?" Harry asked, alarmed.

"His magic is almost gone," Zoot said, looking like she was about to cry. "He needs to bond, but he can't. No one wants him."

Harry felt relief and smiled. "That's good." At Zoot's horrified look, he realized what he had said. "No Zoot, I'm not glad he's having trouble, I'm glad he's free because I need an elf for my family." He looked at Dobby now. "Dobby, would you like to bond with my family and work for us?"

It took a moment, but Dobby finally looked up again, although this time there were tears streaming down his face. "The great Harry Potter wants me?"

"Yes, Dobby. That's why I had Zoot look for you," he said gently. "Look around you. There's plenty to keep you busy here for a long time. You can also come see me whenever you need to. We won't be here very much for the next two or three years; but after that, we'll be here a lot more often. One day, we'll even live here all the time."

Without warning, Dobby flung himself at Harry, throwing his short arms around as much of Harry's chest as he could as he sobbed.

"The great Harry Potter is so good to Dobby again. Dobby does not deserve such happiness."

Harry looked at Sirius, who returned the questioning look. Sirius did wiggle his finger in a small circle near the side of his head. Harry was not sure Dobby was crazy, but he understood Sirius wondering that.

"Dobby, what do I have to do to bond you?"

The elf pulled back. "Dobby do the bonding." He thrust both hands forward and put them over Harry's heart.

A moment later, there was a short burst of white light and Harry felt a wave of magic wash through him. "Wow!"

"I felt that too," Gabrielle said.

"Me too," Hermione and Ginny both said.

Dobby looked at him seriously and formally. "Master Harry Potter, Dobby is at your service." He turned and looked at the girls. "Mistress Hermi-ney, Mistress Ginny, Mistress Gabbre-el, Dobby is at your service."

Hermione gasped. "How do you know?"

"Dobby is bonded to Master Harry Potter and knows who is his family," Dobby explained as if it should have been obvious.

"It's his magic," Sirius commented, causing Dobby to nod.

"How do you know we're his family already?" Hermione asked, not letting it drop.

"Dobby can see magic between you and Master Harry Potter. Dobby doesn't know why it is there, but he can see it."

Harry put his hand on Dobby's shoulder to gently turn him back around. "Dobby, that is one of our secrets and you can't tell anyone until we are officially married. Do you understand?"

Dobby nodded vigorously, causing his ears to flap a little. "Dobby understands and will keep Master Harry Potter's secrets."

"Next, please call me Harry, or if you must, Master Harry. My full name will get old very quickly."

"Yes, Master Harry."

"Dobby, I have a few things for you to do, and a few rules. First the rules. You are not to work too hard until you are back at full health. I know elves like to work, but please make sure you get better."

"Dobby be better by tomorrow. Dobby has master's magic and it is strong," the elf proclaimed proudly.

"Err, OK. I also want you to take care of yourself by making sure you always get enough sleep, enough to eat, and whatever else you need for yourself. Second, if you need to talk to one of us, be sure you aren't seen by anyone else. We're around Muggles a lot," Harry explained.

"Dobby understands."

"I'll introduce you to Hermione's parents and to Gabrielle's parents as soon as I can so you'll know who they are. You're allowed to be seen by them too." He watched the elf nod again. "Next, I want you to find something better to wear. You are a part of this family and you need to look good; you need a proper uniform."

"Dobby will check the elf quarters here and see what he can find."

"Lastly, I want you to start cleaning. Start with the bedrooms on the first floor, the kitchen, and the main family living room. Oh, also do the entry way and parlor up front soon. We need to go, so we'll have to come back later to see the rest of the house." Harry looked up at the girls. "Did I miss anything?"

"He'll probably need some money for food and other things," Sirius told him.

"Right." Harry pulled his money bag out and dumped a handful of Galleons out and one of the platinum Claymores. "Do you know how much this is worth?" Harry asked about the Claymore.

"Yes, Dobby knows. Old master had a few."

"Very good. If you need more money, come ask me."

"Dobby will plant garden too and grow good food there. Dobby not need much money after that."

"Harry?" Ginny called to him. "We'll need some way to travel too. I doubt there's any working Floo Powder here."

"Dobby can get Floo Powder. Dobby can get Portkeys too."

Harry perked up at that.

"Two would be very good," Hermione said, warming to the idea immediately. "Can you get us two permanent ones? One would be to our front door here, and the other would be to the back door of my parents' house. That way we could come and go as needed."

"If they're not too expensive, one to Sirius's house would be good too," Ginny added.

"Dobby can get forms and take them in, but wizards need to sign it."

"I'll sign them and that would probably hide that they are for you, Harry," Sirius suggested.

"Good idea. Dobby, get three forms for permanent Portkeys and take them to Sirius at his house," Harry ordered.

Dobby left with a pop to start his tasks, looking much happier than when he had first appeared.

"We probably better go, Harry, but we should do one thing before we go for now. We need to look at the Floo Network connection," Sirius told them as he headed out of the room.

In the front parlor, he showed Harry how to check the access list. Harry did not know who most of the people on it were, so he removed them. Sirius and Remus were on the list and left there. Interestingly, Harry's name was there. Sirius helped him add the girls' names, as well as Jean-Aimé's and Apolline's. The connection was off for now, but when Sirius turned it on then it would be functional.

On the road by post box, Sirius Side-Along Apparated each of them to the Grangers, making him quite tired by the end. Zoot fetched a Pepperup potion for him so he would have enough energy for the afternoon. Sirius picked that method of transportation because they probably did not have enough time to ride the Knight Bus.

Dan and Emma returned home to find lunch waiting on them, cooked by Harry and Hermione.

"You'll never believe what we found out today," Hermione told them as they sat down to eat.

"What dear?" Emma asked.

"We found Harry's ancestral house!"

"Seriously?" Dan looked very surprised.

"Of course I am," Sirius said with a grin. Everyone else groaned and shot him a glare for his bad joke.

"Hermione found it mentioned in some documents so we went to find it. I also found a house elf who was free to come work for me, so he's going to start cleaning it and getting it ready for us to live in when we finish school," Harry told them.

Dan looked relieved at the mention of waiting until after school.

"I think we'll have a way of getting you there by the weekend, so we can visit it then," Harry said proudly.

"I'd like to see what you have," Emma told him. Dan agreed with her.

That afternoon was spent at the zoo and the group had a lot of fun.

The next morning, Zoot delivered a small box to Harry that had been delivered to Sirius. Inside, he found a ring with a white rabbit's foot on a short chain, a metal key about three inches long, and small pocket knife on a short chain. The accompanying letter told him where each Portkey went and the activation word. Sirius also wrote that he had paid for them and that he would have the Floo Network connection reopened when Harry was ready to live there.

He also received a letter from Neville. It was a surprise to receive an invite for the four of them to visit Longbottom Manor Sunday at ten in the morning. Even more of a surprise was that Neville said Luna would be there too and that he wanted all of them to meet his Gran. Harry was not sure why Neville wanted that, but he trusted his friend.

(A/N: Thanks to "hubriswriter" for the idea to take care of the Wills. It's a realistic thing to do.)

Chapter 27 - New Outlooks, part 1

Sirius came over on Saturday morning as requested. Dan and Emma had asked him to come and explain a few things as they toured Potter Manor.

"Are you ready?"

Harry was not sure who Sirius was asking, but he answered as he pulled out his three inch long metal key Portkey and his wand. "We were waiting on you to get here," he said with a smirk to tease his godfather. "Everyone put a finger on the key." When they did, he touched his wand to it and said, "To Home."

A few seconds later, they landed in a cove of trees and bushes just inside the fence. The only direction open to the outside of the cove was towards the house, and there was a path in that direction as well as a small gate.

"I, uh..." Dan said nervously as he looked around. Emma seems just as uncomfortable.

"It's only the wards," Harry said as he took his mother's hand. "Bear it as best you can until we get you through the gate." He led the group forward, with Hermione taking her father, and Ginny and Gabrielle taking Sirius. Harry thought he was going to have to find out how to key them into the wards, as Sirius had been years ago.

As soon as they were through the wards at the gate, everyone relaxed, even Dan and Emma.

"This countryside is very pretty," Emma commented as she looked around.

Dan nodded his agreement, although he was focusing more on the large manor house ahead. "Are all Wizarding families this well off?"

Your house is the smallest I've seen, Sirius, and yet it's bigger than most non-magical houses that I've been in."

Sirius laughed for a moment. "No, Dan, you just associate with some exceptional people. The Potters and Blacks are some of the oldest magical families in Britain. We're not the wealthiest, but our longevity does give us a measure of wealth that the younger families generally don't have. After talking with Jean-Aimé and doing a little research, I found that the Delacours are one of the best established and wealthiest families in France. It's merely your ... good luck to have us all as part of your family."

"I see..."

"The Weasleys are below average in income," Ginny said without any shame, "but the family house is probably more typical. I'm sure my father would be happy to show you around it if you wanted."

"Actually, your father is not below average in income," Sirius gently corrected her with a caring look. "He is a Ministry Department Head; he just has a few more Hogwarts fees than the average family. Also, your family has the asset of the thirty acres of land The Burrow sits on, which offsets the lack of cash. Taken as a whole, the Weasley family is in a comfortable position. Added to that, Arthur is also well respected at the Ministry. Be proud of your birth family, Ginny."

The redhead gave him a grateful smile for his support.

"So how many Wizarding families have a manor house like this," Dan asked to steer the attention back towards the house they were about to enter.

"That's hard to answer as it depends on how you define family," Sirius said. "Taking the Blacks for example, for now, all the Blacks do, as I'm all that's officially left of them. Several generations back, my great-grandfather had two brothers and a sister, I think. The family

house belonged to him as head of the Black family, but you could also say that it belonged to the extended Black family too. It depends on how you want to view it."

Harry opened the front door and led them in. He was pleased to see the entry way and front parlor looked clean. A wave of his wand turned the magical gas lights on, making the place look very normal, as if someone lived here now.

Dobby arrived with a pop and a bow. "Good morning, Master Harry."

"Good morning, Dobby," Harry returned, pleased to see the elf looked to be in much better health and better attired in what looked like a miniature butler's suit. "I like your uniform - very spiffy."

Dobby preened and literally bounced on his toes for a few seconds. "Thank you, Master Harry. I found it in the elf quarters." He waved his hand over the suit and a few smudges of dust disappeared. He also became fixated on the Potter crest on his chest for a few seconds before returning his attention to Harry. "Can I get you or your guests anything, Master Harry? Tea?"

"Tea in the family room, if you can tell me where it is."

"It is on the right and I will be serving you." Dobby disappeared with a pop.

"Right. This way then," Harry said and led them through the heavy double doors.

"What is this room for?" Emma asked. "It looks like a family room."

"This is the public meeting place," Hermione answered. "That fireplace is for the Floo Network."

"Oh, so friends could come over?"

"Yes, Mum. This sash here rings the bell to let someone know you're here, although I would think the house elf would know first." Hermione led her parents into the house proper.

Harry guided them down the hallway, looking in the first room on the right. It was a library. He stood there casually and waited for Hermione to catch up. He also noticed Ginny look in and then glance towards her older sister-mate with anticipation.

"Is this the family roo..." Hermione started to ask as she looked in, seeing a good-sized two-story room filled with books. The floor and the catwalk around the room for the second story both had gliding ladders attached to the walls.

Harry could see her think about all the wonderful things she could learn here. It was so stereo-typical Hermione that it was amusing. He grabbed her hand and pulled the unwilling girl away. "There will be plenty of time, years even, to enjoy that room. Besides, it's not clean and ready to be used yet."

She started to give him a pouty look until giggles grabbed her attention. Hermione shot an annoyed look at Ginny and Gabrielle, who stuck their tongues out at her, which she returned, causing laughter all around.

On the left was a large dining room, which was clean. The table there would seat twenty. The next doorway on the left led to the kitchen. A quick look in there showed it to be spotless with a tea service waiting.

The next room on the right was the family room. Dobby was there working his elf-magic to prepare the room for use. The last sheet over the furniture disappeared before the dust and cobwebs left, as if blown away.

"We'll be back here for tea in about five minutes, Dobby," Harry told

him so he would not feel too rushed.

"I'm sorry I'm not ready, Master Harry. Bad elf! Dobby go punish himself for not having master's room ready."

"No, Dobby! No punishments!" Harry yelled to stop the elf before he did anything. "I didn't tell you to have this room ready the other day. You're doing a good job. I wanted to show my parents more of the house before we sat down is all."

"Thank you, Harry, for treating him well," Hermione softly told him as they continued down the hallway for the stairs at the end.

"He's a person too, even if he looks a little different," he replied. He also blushed when Hermione gave him a kiss on the cheek for his declaration. Ignoring a chuckle from his godfather, he said, "Let's look up the stairs before we have tea."

Dan and Emma were impressed by the bedrooms on the first floor. Going up one more floor, they found eight smaller rooms. Half were bedrooms and the other half looked like they had been used for hobby rooms, which Sirius confirmed.

"I can't remember how they were all used," Sirius said as they check out the smaller rooms, "but I remember your mother using one for a potions lab. Your grandmother used one to paint, portraits that is. James and I used one to work on our pranks the summer before our last year in Hogwarts."

One did look like it had been a potions lab at one time, but there was nothing personal left in it, to Harry's disappointment. The other three non-bedrooms were only used for storage now.

Back on the ground floor, they went into the family room, which had large fireplace and comfortable leather covered furniture around it, as well as a large fur rug on the floor.

"What is that?" Emma asked, pointed at the pure white pelt on the floor.

"It's a Yeti pelt," Sirius answered. "If I remember correctly, Harry's grandfather killed it and brought the pelt back. He was quiet proud of it since Yeti are hard to find and kill. He bragged about to all of his close friends and I overheard him once."

"But..." Hermione gasped an objection she could not completely voice.

"I know," Sirius replied to the unasked question, "but the books are wrong that no wizard has gotten close to one. There's the proof."

Ginny knelt down and felt the fur. "It's so soft."

Gabrielle knelt and then rolled onto it.

Sirius chuckled. "If I didn't think it would get me into more trouble than I could handle, I would have animated the pelt for the head to rise up and look at her," he said, pointing to Gabrielle - who glared at him.

Harry chuckled. "I'm not sure if the first fireball would have hit the Yeti or you."

"That's what stopped me," Sirius said sheepishly, causing Dan and Emma to grin at him.

Dobby popped into the room with the Tea set and served as everyone took a seat.

"What do you think?" Harry asked his adoptive parents.

"I'm impressed and I'm glad you have something from your family,"

Dan replied as he looked at his wife for her answer.

"It is very nice and it's a good thing you have help to take care of it. It's a lot of house to clean," Emma said, her tone making it very clear she was glad not to have to clean it all. Everyone chuckled.

"Dobby does a very good job," Hermione said.

"And we have plenty of room to fly," Ginny added.

"It's for family," Gabrielle told them.

Dan and Emma shared a thoughtful look, but said nothing else in the end.

"Dobby?" Harry called.

"Yes, Master Harry," said the elf after popping in.

"I've noticed that Sirius can remember the house when he's here, but has trouble when he's not here. Is there a way I can add him to the wards?" He watched Dobby think about that for a moment.

"Dobby is not sure, but the Master's Study may have the answer."

Harry was surprised. "I didn't see a study. Do you mean the library?"

"No, Master Harry. Master's Study is its own room with a desk and books."

"That sounds interesting. Can you take me there?" To Harry's further surprise, Dobby walked over and grabbed his hand and "pulled". For a split second, everything went black.

When his sight came back, Harry fell to the floor, since he was in a sitting position with no chair under him anymore.

"Dobby is sorry, Master Harry!" the elf wailed.

"Shush, Dobby; I'm fine." He stood up and looked around the dusty room he was now in. It took him a moment to realize Dobby has just transported him, something he was not aware house-elves could do.

"Master Harry, I am called, but I will return soon." The elf popped out.

It took only a second for Harry to realize what had happened and he chuckled. He wondered if Dobby would be bringing someone else here too or if he would be alone here while the elf apologized profusely to the girls.

The room had a cast iron stove for warmth, a large desk with a chair, a wingback chair near the stove, a couple of book cases on one wall that were about three-quarters filled, a door on one wall, and large picture frame next to the door. The picture grabbed his attention and caused him to walk over. With a grin, he viewed a map of the house along with seven labeled dots on it. The other six dots were hurriedly walking out of the family room and in his direction.

Deciding to leave this a secret for now, he left the secret room before they found him. As he started to leave, he saw a single book on the desk. Hoping that was what he needed, he grabbed it and opened the door to leave. In doing so, he saw a small indentation where the door handle on the outside should be, and indentation about the size of the end of a wand. Memorizing where it was, he shut the door and walked into the middle of the library, just as the three girls hurried into the room.

"There you are!" Hermione rushed over to him. Ginny and Gabrielle only a step behind her, checking him out to make sure he was all right.

"I hope you didn't do anything to Dobby," Harry said calmly. "I'm sure

he didn't mean to alarm you."

"We didn't, but still ... you simply disappeared and when I called Dobby he couldn't tell me exactly where you were other than in the Master's Study..." Hermione's breathing was returning to normal now as the adults walked in.

"We knew where you were, but not how to get there," Ginny explained, looking calm again. Gabrielle nodded.

"Are you all right?" Emma asked as well, concern showing.

"I'm fine. Dobby took me to a secret room." He looked at the book in his hand and smiled when he saw the title. "I found this book on my family, too. See, the Book of Potter." The girls looked excited.

"Let's go look outside before we return," Harry suggested as he shrunk the book down and put it in a pocket. "I want to see if there's a Quidditch Pitch."

"I don't remember there being one," Sirius told them.

Harry and Ginny were disappointed to find that Sirius was correct. However, Harry thought that putting up goals would not be very difficult and planned to do that soon. He spent an hour that evening reading his family book, amazed at what he found in it.

Sunday morning, the bond-mates used the white rabbit's foot Portkey to travel to Sirius's house, then use the Floo to travel to Neville's. Luna was already there and greeted them with Neville.

"Harry, I'm glad you could make it," Neville said warmly as he shook Harry's hand. "Hermione, Ginny, and ... Gabrielle, right?"

The little blonde witch smiled at him and nodded, suddenly shy.

"Hello, Ginny, Harry, Hermione, and Gabrielle," Luna said pleasantly. She was dressed in multiple shades of dark pink and cream robes, making it look like an abstract picture of a wild garden of roses or maybe of tongues of fire. They looked good on her and went well with Neville's black robes.

Neville led them to the sitting area, where his grandmother awaited. "May I present my Gran, Augusta Longbottom."

Harry took her hand and bowed from the waist as Sirius had taught him. "Madam Longbottom, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"And to you, Mr Potter. My Neville has only good things to say about you." She looked at the girls with curiosity.

Harry was not sure of the best way to introduce them without giving the secret away, and he had talked with Sirius several times about the problem. "These are my best friends: Hermione, Ginny, and Gabrielle." Each girl gave a practiced curtsy to the matron.

"I'm pleased to meet you as well, young ladies. Won't you have a seat?" Madam Longbottom snapped her fingers as she sat. A tea service suddenly appeared on the low table and she started to pour. The bond-mates sat on a long sofa, as they usually did, while Neville and Luna took a settee.

"Neville tells me you've been a good friend to him. I'm pleased with that, as both of your fathers were also friends. Actually, the Longbottoms and Potters have long been on friendly terms." She handed the teacups and saucers out, as well as passing the sugar and cream around for them each to doctor their tea as desired. "He also tells me that it would be in everyone's best interest for us to have a conversation." She looked at Harry intensely. "I find some of his stories from Hogwarts difficult to believe, but I know that he's never lied to me either. He suggested that you could fill in some of the missing details to explain them better."

Harry was not sure exactly how to take that and looked over to his friend.

Neville nervously smiled at him. "Gran has recently been elected to the Hogwarts Board of Governors, and ... well, I don't have all the details about what happened at times, but I know enough and Luna has said a few more things, and..." He trailed off looking like he hoped that Harry would understand.

As usual, Hermione seemed to catch on faster. "Exactly what are you wanting to know about our time at school, Madam Longbottom?"

The woman examined the fine china teacup for a moment. "There is a saying that goes: Where there's smoke there's fire. I've heard some truly appalling stories about the last few years at Hogwarts from multiple sources, and yet most of the people involved - or perhaps accused - have reputations that make those stories difficult to take seriously. I've also known some of these people for years so they have a good reputation with me, and yet ... I also know that it is possible to hide events and abilities with magic. In short, I have contradictions that I can't explain and yet I must, as I take my new responsibilities to Hogwarts seriously. I'm asking for you to tell me of any unusual events that have happened at school while you've been there. If you would like to change Hogwarts for the better, even if only for your children, I would like for you to truthfully, and without holding back, tell me what you think of the school, the professors, and what you believe needs to be changed and why."

Harry slowly blinked once, hardly able to believe what she was asking. A look to Hermione and Ginny confirmed that they felt as surprised as he did. He cleared his throat softly. "Madam Longbottom, were we to do as you ask then people should be sacked. Is that your goal?"

Slowly, one corner of her mouth rose slightly. "Mr Potter, without your

testimony, we already have enough information that I can already guarantee you one professor will be sacked and another will be sent away. I have enough information to put yet a third under intense scrutiny. I do not desire to sack professors, but if sacking professors will restore the reputation of Hogwarts so that parents will send their children there again, then so be it.

"If you are not aware, the present reputation of Hogwarts, between your leaving, the fiasco of the Triwizard Tournament, and other recent blunders almost guarantees a smaller enrollment next year if nothing is done. The Board of Governors must take decisive action and the sooner the better. Will you help me, Mr Potter, Miss Granger, and Miss Weasley?" she entreated them with her passionate speech.

"I know you don't want to go there next year, but I'm sure you'll want your children to go there one day," Ginny told him quietly.

Harry understood that she really meant she wanted their children to go there, but could not say it that way. Of course, she had a point because his ancestral home was in Britain.

"It would be the responsible thing to do and it won't hurt us," Hermione said.

That seemed reasonable too, he thought. There had been many times he had wished there was someone he could report Dumbledore's shenanigans to so they would be safer. A look to Gabrielle showed her to be nodding slowly in agreement.

"We'll help, but we're still attending Beauxbatons next year," he told her, to see what she would say.

Augusta Longbottom nodded. "Most unfortunate, but I understand that bridges have already been burnt. Neville, please freshen our drink." She snapped her fingers and a well-dressed house-elf popped in. "My writing materials, please."

The elf left and returned in a few seconds with a large journal, quill, and ink.

"You may start where you like. I will endeavor to keep this anonymous; however, I'm sure some of this will be unique to you, which would allow people to guess it is one of you three. In that case, I'll attempt to keep that information in reserve if possible."

Harry nodded. "Thank you, Madam Longbottom. Before we start on discussing professors, trolls, basilisk, Dementors, and other problems, I think I should tell you another story about a few of the professors first. When my parents died on Halloween of 1981..."

Harry, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Luna told stories for the next hour and a half. They all moved to the dining room and continued through a leisurely lunch and dessert, and then another hour back in the sitting room, with Gabrielle confirming her near-death experience this year. A very cross Augusta Longbottom left them in the early afternoon to review her extensive notes from the students.

The six students went outside to spend the rest of the afternoon together. Harry pulled Neville away while Ginny pulled Luna away. Hermione and Gabrielle followed Ginny towards a large shade tree.

"So, you and Luna?" Harry asked with a smirk.

Neville bashfully kicked at stone on the ground as they walked towards a greenhouse. "Yeah," he finally said. "We've been having a lot of fun hanging out together, and well ... I finally asked her out the day after the third task."

Harry laughed and slapped his friend on the back. "Good for you. How's it going?"

"Mostly good." At Harry's raised eyebrow, Neville knew he had to continue. "We get some funny looks sometimes, but what bothers me is how some of her house-mates treat her. That makes me angry and she doesn't like that." He leaned against the greenhouse and looked at the girls in the distance. "She doesn't like me to help her and I want to make it better for her," Neville said a little frustrated.

"Sounds to me like you're taking care of it," Harry replied. Neville gave him a questioning look. "You're talking to your Gran about it. You should also be sure to mention it specifically and ask why her head of house has let it go on for four years, or why he hasn't made the Prefects stop it. I like Flitwick, a lot, but I think he's too hands off with the Ravenclaws if he lets that happen. In fact, I think all the heads of house are too hands off, with maybe the exception of Sprout and I simply don't know enough about Hufflepuff to say."

"You have a point," Neville said slowly as he thought it through. "I like McGonagall, but even she isn't really that good of a head of house, as some of your stories showed. And we all know what an arse Snape is," he said with a mischievous grin.

Harry chuckled. "We do, and you have enough melted cauldrons to prove it."

Neville chuckled before he gave Harry a sly look. "I can't get her to tell me, but I think Gran's going to push for Snape to be sacked."

Harry grinned evilly. "As he should be. He's an arse like you said, but he's also redundant. Professor Tonks has taken over and she's good."

Neville nodded agreeably. "Harry?" he asked tentatively. "What's it like?"

"What's what like?"

"Being bonded to three girls."

Harry looked at Neville, having been looking at the girls in the distance too, and saw that his friend was actually blushing.

"Why? Are you planning to marry three girls as well?" Harry asked, doing his best to keep a straight face.

"No!" Neville looked shocked until Harry started laughing, then he slapped him on the shoulder. "I was just wondering what it was like to be ... with a girl and ... for it to be permanent."

Harry considered the question. "Are you that serious about Luna?"

"Merlin, no. We just got together. But between Luna and you and the dance with Padma, I've started to really think about girls ... and think that maybe it would be ... pleasant to have someone who thinks you're special and wants to be with you."

The girls were talking with their heads close together, as if afraid they would be overheard, and Harry watched them for a moment. "I don't know that I'm a good person to answer that. I didn't have a choice, Neville. If I wasn't bonded now, I know I wouldn't have a clue about girls."

"Yeah, but you are, so you do have a clue - at least more than me," Neville insisted.

"True enough." The girls were laughing and sneaking looks over at them, making Harry wonder if they were talking about him or Neville. "I still don't know that I can answer, Neville, because the bond helps us get along. We can still get angry with each other, but we rarely stay that way for very long. Still, I like being with them and now I can't imagine any other way. I think that's what marriage for a normal person would be like. It changes how you see yourself and after a while, you're no longer you but part of a family. Does that make

sense?" He saw Neville looking at him wistfully.

"That would be great."

"Neville, you're like me because you don't have your parents to grow up with, but that's no reason to get married as soon as possible."

"What? No! No, I wasn't thinking that. I just ... I just wondered what it was like." Neville sighed and kicked at the ground again. "I do wish my Dad was able to explain it to me, and a lot of other things. Thanks Harry. I'd go to my Gran, but I can't really do that."

Harry nodded as he thought he understood. At least he would have Dan, even without the bond. Of course, there was also...

"Neville, I got an idea. Why don't you write Sirius and ask him if he'll come over and spend some time with you. He's really an overgrown prat most of the time, but that's what makes him fun and he will answer questions." Harry watched his friend consider the suggestion.

"He is from an old family, which would make my Gran feel a little better, although I think that's a silly reason." Neville slowly started to smile. "Thanks Harry, I may do that." He started to chuckle. "I'm sure there's a relation if I look hard enough."

Harry chuckled too. "I believe I saw a Longbottom on Sirius's family tree, but I can't remember how far back. Shall we go join the girls? I'm sure they've had plenty of time to talk about us."

Neville grinned and they started walking over.

The six had a lot of fun together for the rest of the afternoon. When the bond-mates left right before dinner, Neville and Luna were promised an invitation for a week in France.

The next morning Sirius came over to the house. "Here I am," he

announced when he walked in the back door.

"Good, you're early," Harry told him as he pulled out his wand.

"Whoa! What are you going to do with that?" Sirius asked, eyeing him a little warily.

"Do you want to come over to my house one day?"

Sirius nodded.

"Then stand still." Harry did a spell that ended with him tapping Sirius on the forehead. "Do you remember about Potter Manor now?"

Sirius blinked for a moment and then smiled. "I do and I'm not there. Good job, kiddo. I take it you found the spell yesterday?"

"Yeah, I found it last night. I did Dan and Emma too and they can also remember. Dobby?" Harry called with a light clap, the combination being their agreed upon signal.

The elf popped in. "Yes, Master Harry."

"Please return this book to the desk in the Master Study. I really don't want it to get lost." Harry handed his family book over.

"Of course, Master Harry. Is there anything else?"

"No, Dobby. I'm reasonably sure we'll visit once more before September, so I'll see you then."

Dobby popped away.

"I guess I need to help the girls bring their trunks down, I'll be back in a minute." Harry went up the stairs to the girl's room. He watched them finish Gabrielle's things, her being the last. That gave him an

idea for her. "Sirius is here," he announced.

"If you can get Gabrielle's, we can get ours," Hermione told him as she pulled out her wand.

A few minutes later, the bond-mates, Sirius, Emma, and Dan were all in the living room saying good-bye and hugging.

"Don't forget to owl or call after you find out about your entrance exams," Emma admonished them.

"We won't and we'll see you in a month when you come to visit," Hermione reminded her as she hugged her mother. All the kids were hugging Dan and Emma.

All set to leave, Sirius held out the silver goblet. He would be acting as chauffer. A moment later, the troop was in the Delacour house again. Apolline and Jean-Aimé were both there waiting.

"Mother! Father!" Gabrielle gushed as she threw herself at her mother. The other kids hugged their parents-in-law more sedately. The Delacours greeted Sirius.

"Did you have a good time?" Apolline asked.

"We did," Gabrielle answered quickly.

"I found my ancestral home while we were there, thanks to Hermione," Harry reported, causing the girl to blush slightly.

"Wonderful. Will we get to see it next time we're in Britain?" Jean-Aimé asked.

Harry nodded. "You can, but I'll need to key you into the wards. I know the spell."

"Very good. Why don't you go unpack in your rooms and then you can spend the day as you wish before you see Madame Maxime tomorrow," Jean-Aimé suggested.

Harry turned and gave his godfather a hug. "Thanks for bringing us back. Oh, do you know how you're related to the Longbottoms?"

"Hmm." Sirius thought about it while he hugged the girls good-bye. "I'm not sure, but something like an eighth or ninth cousin. I think we have to go back to my great-great-grandfather to have a common ancestor. Why?"

"Well, I mentioned that you might be able to answer some questions he has and I was hoping you'd help him," Harry said a little tentatively, not so sure now that he was talking to Sirius.

Sirius smiled and chuckled. "I'd be happy to, if I can." He slowly lost his smile as he asked, "This is because Frank isn't able to, isn't it?"

Harry hoped this was not giving away too much. "There's some things a boy can't ask his grandmother."

Sirius nodded knowingly and clapped Harry on the shoulder. "I'll help where I can. Frank and Alice were friends and I should have thought of this. Take care Harry." He disappeared with small pop as he touched his wand to the silver goblet Portkey.

Harry saw approving looks from Jean-Aimé and Apolline, which made him feel better. Pulling his wand out, he stacked Gabrielle's trunk on top of his and caused the two trunks to follow him.

After unpacking, they spent the rest of the morning doing some last minute revising for their upcoming exams. The afternoon was spent talking, playing, and a little kissing - although Gabrielle had to settle for snuggling.

Just before dinner, the signal on the Floo sounded. Apolline looked around and smiled at her daughter. «Gabrielle, please go see who came over.»

The little girl arose from her place leaning against Harry and walked into the next room. Everyone else heard her squeal, «Fleur!» Apolline chuckled and followed them all to greet her oldest daughter.

«Welcome home, my dear. How are you? How did you do on your exams?»

«I'm very tired, Mother. The exams are very appropriately named.» Drawing a chuckle from her mother, and a look of interest from Hermione. «I think I did well, though.» Fleur brightened. «I also received a letter from Gringotts. They want me to go to their Paris branch on Friday for an interview.»

«Did they say what you might be doing?» her mother asked.

«Not completely, but some possibilities were: gathering information for them in places the goblins couldn't go and working with some of their customers on special projects, which would probably include some curse breaking. The letter also said that some travel to nearby countries would probably be required,» Fleur explained.

«That sounds very interesting,» Hermione said, the other three mates nodded their agreement.

«Go put your trunk in your room and then come to dinner. I'll send a message to your father.» Apolline sent an elf to Jean-Aimé's office to tell him to come home. He greeted his oldest daughter joyfully.

At dinner, they all caught up on the news with each other. Fleur described her exams and Hermione had to restrain herself from asking more than basic questions, and she was successful because she knew she could ask the older girl those questions later. Harry

talked about his ancestral home. The Delacours talked about their holiday on Crete.

During dessert, Apolline looked at her husband and smiled. He returned the smile and nodded. «We do have one other bit of news.» Apolline looked mostly at Fleur and Gabrielle. «You will have a baby brother in about six months.»

Gabrielle dropped her fork and ran around the table to her mother and hugged her. Fleur also gave her a hug when Gabrielle let go.

Harry saw that Jean-Aimé looked very pleased with himself. «Congratulations,» the boy said.

«So he'll be born around the end of December?» Ginny asked.

«Probably mid-December. My fertile time came late this spring.» At Hermione's questioning look, Apolline continued her explanation. «As I think I've mentioned in the past, Veela are fertile only twice a year: in the spring and in the autumn, and it usually only lasts about a month during each period. However, when that period occurs varies between February and April, and between September and November. For me this year, my time was in April.» When Hermione turned thoughtful, Apolline smiled and added, "«Yes, that means all Veela babies are born between October and early January, and then again between April and early July. Gestation is a little different for us, being about eight to eight and half months.»

«Thank you,» Hermione told her. «So, this is something that we'll need to be aware of for Gabrielle?»

«Yes. She should know all of that, but it will help for you and Ginny to be aware of it too. Gabrielle will be a little extra ... needy during those times of the year,» she said with a smirk and a quick glance at Harry. «I'm not exactly sure when those urges will start, but being bonded probably will accelerate the year it starts.» Her youngest daughter

and son-in-law looked very embarrassed and Apolline felt very smug about that, hoping it would delay their intimacy a little. However, she also knew that when the urge hit, they would have a hard time denying it.

«When will you start showing?» Fleur asked.

«In about a month, or maybe as long as two. Veela babies are generally small at birth. Even if he carries no Veela traits, he'll still be born after about eight months and be small, since I influence that.» She rubbed her still flat stomach and looked at her husband lovingly. «He will be our last child.»

«I'm so happy for you.» Fleur hugged her mother again and then her father. She turned to Harry and the girls. «Come to the family room. I want to know something, and tell you a few things.»

After everyone made themselves comfortable, Fleur looked at Harry. «What happened during the third task for you? Madame Maxime would tell me little and what she did say sounded unbelievable.»

Harry explained what happened, leaving nothing out, including what Malfoy tried to do to Gabrielle and his response.

Fleur's look darkened at the part about Malfoy. «That's why they were asking if we'd seen a blond boy. No one could find him, so I believe he found your large spiders. Good riddance!»

«We all agree,» Harry said, indicating the bond-mates, «that Malfoy deserved punishment, but I am starting to question if I went too far. I feel a little guilty, and yet, if he was willing to sell someone into slavery at fourteen, what would he have done later in life?»

Jean-Aimé nodded. «It shows you still have a conscience, which is good. I know it will be a little difficult to live with and will probably make you think twice before you do something like this again, but I

too am glad you did it.» Apolline agreed wholeheartedly with her husband.

«I can understand feeling guilty, although in a different way,» Fleur told him. «I never should have been picked for the Tournament. If I had known the tasks ahead of time, I would not have entered my name.» She hung her head, looking regretful.

«Why?» Hermione asked. «I know the second task was difficult for you, but you were very close to the center of the maze when you ran into Krum.»

Fleur looked up at the girl. «Thank you, you're being kind. I did do reasonably well until I ran into Krum and he cursed me, ending my chance there; but the first two tasks were disasters.»

«I thought you did well in the first task,» Ginny told her.

«No,» Fleur shook her head vigorously. «While I am a strong witch because of my Veela heritage, that heritage worked against me, making me a poor choice and the task much harder.»

«I don't understand,» Hermione said, perplexed.

«In the first task, the dragon saw me not as an opponent to steal an egg, but as a competitor like another dragon because I'm also a creature of fire. It made my work much more difficult. The second task placed me underwater, a place Veela normally avoid. You will rarely see Veela enter water that is over their head, and when they do, it is only because of great need.»

Apolline nodded confirmation when Hermione looked at her. «You still did very well, my daughter, even if the tasks were stacked against you. It was doubly unfortunate that the Bulgarian Krum was Imperiused to attack others.» She shook her head in derision. «I believe it will be many years before they hold another Triwizard

Tournament, if ever.»

«I didn't know it was so hard on you,» Harry told her with admiration. He looked at Apolline. «Now I know why you were so upset when I brought Gabrielle out of the water.»

Apolline gave him a kind smile. «She never should have been there. I was told she was needed to help Fleur and there was literally nothing she had to do other than be available. I wrongly assumed she was to be something like a cheerleader or perhaps an assistant to Fleur in some way, like holding things for her sister. My assumption was made worse by my not asking exactly what Gabrielle would be doing. Again I thank you for saving her, Harry.»

Harry blushed and nodded. He really wanted to change the subject away from the Tournament, so he asked, «Fleur, we're supposed to meet with the Headmistress tomorrow. What can you tell me about her?»

Fleur brightened at the more favorable topic. «She is a good woman, very fair to everyone, and she cares about the school greatly.» They spent the rest of the time before bed talking about Beauxbatons.

While the bond-mates returned to France, an important meeting convened at Hogwarts in the Great Hall. All the teachers were in chairs where the students normally sat while eleven people sat at the head table.

A woman in her sixties stood in the middle of the head table and banged a small gavel. "This meeting of the Hogwarts Board of Governors is now in session. Edna Gamp has the chair and Roy Warner is the scribe."

Gamp surveyed the teachers in front of her. Except for Dumbledore, all were looking nervous, probably due to the fact that they had been told this was a mandatory meeting unless they no longer desired to

be employed here. A part of her disliked what they were about to do, but a slightly bigger part of her understood that it was necessary and that motivated her.

"You have all been called here for us to discuss the current state of affairs at Hogwarts and to plan a new path. Shortly put, this is a sorry excuse for the supposedly best school of magic in Europe." As expected, there were a number of gasps at her pronouncement, but sugar-coating things would not be productive she knew.

"I hear that some of you do not agree with that. Well, let me tell you. If this school does not get better very quickly, then my grandchildren will not be going here in a few years and I don't like the thought of that. Also, I've received a number of letters asking why you are driving children away. On top of that, the Ministry is asking why the number of applicants for Healers, Aurors, and several other important professions are at an all-time low."

"But Hogwarts produced the co-winners of the Triwizard Tournament, and one of those was only fourteen," McGonagall objected.

"That would be the same fourteen year-old who the school never should have let in the Tournament and placed in all the danger? The same Tournament that almost had a non-participant drown? The same Tournament that allowed two participants to be kidnapped from school grounds and almost be killed? The same Tournament that caused a member from a prominent family in Britain to publically leave our country for another school and take two of his friends with him? The same Tournament that caused a fifteen year-old boy to either run away or be abducted - and we still don't know where he is? And the same Tournament that allowed a convicted Death Eater to teach here all year? That Tournament Professor McGonagall?" Gamp knew she was being unfair to Minerva, but the chairwoman wanted to make sure they all knew how bad things were.

The usually stern and in-control professor actually pushed back into

her seat in an effort to get away from the questions. She also did not answer.

"With my apologies to Minerva because she had very little responsibility for any of the problems I just named, I hope you all understand how much work there is to do to return Hogwarts to its former excellent status. If we do not, there will be fewer students here next year than this last year, or so the letters threaten." Gamp was pleased with the shocked murmurs.

"The Board met once last week to start a list of issues to address and possible solutions. I've been shown yet more items to investigate and address, and we shall start there first. So that everyone knows each other, especially as half of the Board is new, we shall start with introductions. For the staff, when it is your turn to introduce yourself, please tell us what you do here and how long you've been employed."

Gamp started with Roy Warner at one end of the table and went to the other end, then through the entire staff, including the non-teaching staff.

Then the questions started. Many policies were brought up and how they were implemented was discussed. Those concerning safety were given great scrutiny. Various events were discussed: unusual Quidditch injuries, trolls and Dementors at the school, students being petrified, security on the grounds, neighbors in the Forbidden Forest, and dangerous happenings in the classroom. Inter-actions between the houses and the students were also examined.

When there was a break for a late lunch and for the Board to adjourn to a classroom for executive session, the staff was tired and discouraged. Even Dumbledore and Flitwick were not their normally calm and jolly selves.

Albus Dumbledore could not help but notice how many of the things

discussed involved events Harry Potter would have been involved in or known about, and that the grandmother of his close friend - Neville Longbottom - was now on the Board.

When Gamp banged the meeting back into session two hours later, the entire staff was on pins and needles - including Albus Dumbledore.

"I see that many of you are nervous and I wish to put you at ease. Most of you are doing the best you can with what you've been given. The Board recognizes that if we want more, we need to give you more to work with and we shall."

Most of the staff visibly relaxed.

"The Board has decided that many of the school policies are out-dated and need to be updated. A sub-committee will work with the Headmaster to bring us more up to date. Security is major concern, even when there is not a war in progress such as fifteen years ago, therefore there will be two new positions for security personal. One benefit from this is that many of the hours the present staff spends walking the corridors will be returned to you."

The entire staff was pleased with that.

"You will still have to help out a little, but you will have much more time for other teaching opportunities or yourself in the future. Also in regards to time, it seems to us that many of the problems you face are due to lack of time to do everything you must. Therefore, no staff member will hold more than two positions. For example, Professor McGonagall now holds three: Deputy Headmistress, head of house, and professor.

"Those who are head of house will not be teaching more than three years of classes, so you have time to interact with your house and to actually help the students. This would give the students more

guidance and the ability to ask you questions to give them a better education.

"For those professors who only teach, you will no longer be teaching more than five years of classes.

"The Headmaster and Deputy Headmaster will be mostly administrative positions, but they will be required to teach two years of classes to better keep a pulse on the feelings of the students.

"Obviously, we will need to hire more teachers with this reduction in workload. I'm also pleased to tell you that we have enough income that there will be no pay cuts, so you will be paid the same amount for fewer hours of work."

There were several positive murmurs at that announcement.

"One general policy change that we feel needs high-lighting is that all detentions from now on will be educational in some way. We realize punishment is sometimes needed, but needless punishment helps no one. Scrubbing floors is now a thing of the past unless the student needs practice with cleaning charms."

Filch looked upset at that.

"I suspect that the Herbology discipline will benefit the most from this. Potions can also be made, and even sold if we make more than we need. It has also been suggested that Hogwarts create some products that students can charm, transfigure, or otherwise create in detentions that can be sold - as long as the work is done for educational purposes during detentions and not child labor.

"Now for the less than pleasant news..." Gamp saw the tension return to the staff.

"Madam Hooch, you are a very part-time instructor as the referee of

six games of Quidditch a year. Would you like to continue that with a reduction in pay to match your work hours, or would you like to teach a few classes to bring your workload up to match your pay? If you don't have an answer now, you may tell us before the end of the week."

"I believe I'd like to think about it," Hooch replied.

"Very well. Professor Grumbly-Plank. You're paid to substitute on a per class basis. Do you want to continue that or would you like to teach consistently next year? You may also think about this through the week if you need to."

"I would like to teach a few classes all the time, if that's possible," the teacher replied.

"It is. The Headmaster will arrange something with you." Gamp looked at Hagrid. "Professor Hagrid. It has come to our attention that you do well with the larger and more dangerous creatures."

"Thank ya..." Hagrid said, pleased.

"However, that does not work for the younger students and you have not shown the ability to take their needs into account. Therefore, we would like you to return to the position of gameskeeper, although you may teach the two NEWT level Care of Magical Creatures class if you so desire. Do you have an answer for us now, or do you need to consider the matter?"

Hagrid's expression fell. "I'd like to teach the two classes," he finally said.

"You may, although we will also require you to work with whomever teaches the three younger years and that person must approve your lesson plans." Gamp looked around and finally spied the ghost among them.

"Professor Binns?"

The ghost seemed startled to be called upon. "Yes?"

"Did you know you're dead?"

"I, I am?" The ghost looked at himself, especially his hands. "I do appear to be a little transparent."

"Yes, you are dead, Culthbert Binns. The Board of Governors thanks you for your years of service, but we also do not need your service any longer. If you wish to haunt the castle, you're free to do so, or you may wish to move on to the afterlife. However, you will no longer be teaching classes here." Gamp searched for her next victim while the ghost stared at her for a moment and then began to drift out of the room.

"Professor Babbage. It has been said that your course in Muggle Studies reflect Muggle society of a century ago and in no way prepares wizards to understand Muggles today. Many of us on the Board will admit to not knowing if that is true, but a few of us deal with Muggles frequently and they agree with the complaint after looking at your course book. Therefore, you will bring the course up to the present or we ask that you transition to another course of instruction, such as History of Magic. You have until the end of the week to tell us what you'd like to do."

Babbage nodded weakly.

"Mr Filch, we are not sure why you are on staff as many of the duties of caretaker require magic and therefore you are at a disadvantage. We do not mean this as a slight, only that you were hired for a job you can not accomplish. Therefore, we will give you three months pay, a letter of recommendation, and our thanks for your years of service here. Your possessions are packed and sitting in the

Entrance Hall."

Filch was wide-eyed. "I, I'm sacked?"

"We're sorry, Mr Filch, but we no longer need your help here at the school." When Filch said nothing more in his shock, she moved on.

"Professor Tonks, because of your good work, you are now in charge of the Potions department here. You may move here or continue living at home. If you choose to continue living at home, the Headmaster will work out a schedule with you and which of the five years you will be teaching."

Andromeda Tonks was surprised and pleased. "Thank you, Madam Gamp."

Snape looked upset and sneered, an expression which did not change when Gamp looked at him.

"Professor Snape, you are acknowledged to be one of the best Potion Masters in Britain. However, we are not a Potion laboratory but a school and you have proven every year that you have been here by the stack of complaints against you that you are not a teacher. You are relieved of duties immediately. You will not receive any pay or letter of recommendation. Be glad we don't blacklist you. The house-elves have been packing your possessions during this meeting and they are waiting for you by the front door after you say your good-byes."

Everyone was shocked into silence except for Albus Dumbledore. Gamp threw a glare at him as he started to speak and said, "Don't bother defending him as you have in the past, Dumbledore. His poor record speaks for itself and he is the primary reason we don't have enough Healers, Aurors, and other vital people, not to mention that OWL scores in Potions are at an all-time low."

"Professor Trelawney," she said as Gamp turned towards the teacher. "It is widely recognized that true Seers are born and not created by instruction. Therefore, we have decided to cancel the Divination course. We thank you for your service and award you three months pay and a letter of recommendation. Your possessions are also by the front door waiting for you after you've said your good-byes."

Trelawney stared at the chairwoman, frozen and not making a sound, as if unable to believe what she had heard.

Gamp continued after no questions from Trelawney. "Professors Vector, Sinistra, Babbling, Sprout, and Madams Pomfrey and Pince, you are doing well and we thank you for that as well as ask that you continue."

The three professors and two support staff looked relieved while the remaining ones looked concerned.

"Oh, one change with Astronomy that we've planned for is that it will become an optional course. Therefore, like all other optional courses, it will begin in the third year and you can teach all five years. I'm sure you'll want to adjust your curriculum accordingly."

Sinistra nodded her understanding.

"Professor Flitwick. You are acknowledged to be one of the best teachers here as well as an expert in your area of Charms. However, as you heard in our questioning, there is bullying happening in your house and we consider that unacceptable. We ask that you seriously consider how you will fix that and submit a plan to the Headmaster if you wish to continue as head of house, or else we ask you to step down from that role and only be a teacher. Do you have an answer now?"

Flitwick nodded gravely, feeling like he had gotten off lightly compared to some of his colleagues. "Thank you for the opportunity

to improve. I'll prepare a plan to make things better and work with the Headmaster on it."

"That's very acceptable." Gamp looked at the next person on her list. "Professor McGonagall. You are considered a very able administrator and an excellent teacher. We ask that you continue in the role of Deputy Headmaster and, in accordance with the new policies, teach only the NEWT level Transfiguration classes. If that does not appeal to you, you may teach five years of Transfiguration, and we would suggest the upper five years. Do you know what you want to do now or do you need the rest of the week to consider it?"

Minerva McGonagall's mouth worked a few times before she could say anything. She finally cleared her throat and asked, "I won't be head of Gryffindor any more?"

"No," Gamp told her. "We believe you are better in the Deputy Headmistress role than in the head of house role."

McGonagall looked like she could not believe that. "I, I think I'll need to consider my options."

"As you wish," Gamp said agreeably before turning to the last professor she had yet to address. "Professor Dumbledore. You are a great wizard. However, we find that you are not a very good administrator, as evidenced by your lack of leadership for better education, the lack of qualified teachers over the years in various positions, the many troubles and unsafe events in the school, and your propensity for meddling in children's lives outside of school."

Dumbledore cringed mentally, understanding that she was referring to Harry Potter on the last charge.

"As the Wizengamot has removed you from its body, we believe that Hogwarts would be a better school with someone else in charge. We do thank you for the service you have given in the past as a teaching

professor and award you three months pay and letter of recommendation as a teacher. Your possessions are also by the front door waiting for you after you've said your good-byes."

Gamp turned slightly as no one said a word because of shock at Dumbledore getting sacked. "Professor Sprout. Due to your excellent reputation as a teacher and head of house, the Board offers you the role of Headmaster, or Headmistress if you prefer, along with teaching either the first two years or last two years of Herbology. Do you have an immediate answer or do you need to consider it?"

The graying Herbology teacher blinked owlshly, surprised by the offer. "I, I'm flattered, very flattered by the offer." She swallowed nervously. "I'm very tempted by it, but I think a couple of days to think it through would be for the best."

"We understand and we hope that you do accept." Gamp surveyed the crowd. "The Board would also like the school to offer career preparatory classes for seventh years and possibly for the sixth years as well. The suggestions we have are: government, Auror-prep, Healing-prep, Warding, Enchanting, and possibly others as needs have been evaluated. If anyone has any suggestions for these classes, please let us know."

"Unless there are any questions, this session of the Hogwarts Board of Governors is closed." When no one from the mostly shocked crowd said anything, she banged her small gavel and looked pleased.

Augusta Longbottom was very pleased with many of the changes. She watched most of the professors and staff gather around Dumbledore to speak with him before he left. There was no surprise that only Andromeda Tonks spoke with Snape and it was a very brief conversation at that. Snape soon left, as did Filch and Trelawney. Dumbledore left a half hour later. This was turning into a school that she wanted her grandson to attend. It was too bad that it was too late

for the Potter heir and his friends.

(A/N: I had this scene of "fixing Hogwarts" all planned out, and then Clell65619 posted "The Board" in the meantime, doing a much better job of it than I had planned. So, I scaled my scene back and I refer you to his amusing story. I will say that his story influenced me to pick Sprout as Headmistress, so I definitely wanted to give him the nod for that. I don't think it influenced me in any other way as any other similarities were already planned.)

Chapter 28 - New Outlooks, part 2

Apolline led the group of four students through the Floo Network to the main Floo fireplaces of Beauxbatons on Tuesday morning. Madame Maxime was waiting for them and greeted them with a smile.

«Good morning, everyone. I'm happy to see you.» She did look and sound happy too. «Apolline, it's always good to see you. I assume you're here to register Gabrielle?»

«It is good to see you again as well. I am here for Gabrielle,» Apolline answered with a friendly smile, «but I'm also here for Harry, Hermione, and Ginny should anything unusual arise.»

«I understand. I thought we should talk and answer questions this morning as well as take a tour. After lunch, the exams will begin. They can stay here in the dorms or Floo back and forth each day, as desired, but they should be done by Friday afternoon.» The Headmistress looked at them all and the expression on the each of the student's faces made it obvious what they wanted to do.

Apolline could read their expressions just as easily. «They can stay to get a taste of life here as well as learn where everything is before September.» The students looked very pleased, while Apolline's turned more serious. «There is one thing we should discuss before all others, and we will need the utmost privacy.»

«As you wish - we should go to my office, but let me show you a few things on the way.» As the Headmistress turned and started walking down a corridor, she held out her hand and gestured around her. «As you can see by the marble and architecture, this version of Beauxbatons was created and built during the early Renaissance period. The original Beauxbatons was built in 790 AD, or about 200 years before Hogwarts,» she said smugly. «This newer version is several times larger than the original school and also better hidden in

its present location in the valley. I'll show you outside later. We serve students from eleven different countries, twelve now with you joining us. That diversity gives us an open flavor that I believe you'll enjoy. Drawing students from more countries also means that we have a over double the population of Hogwarts at nearly 900 students. If you'll enter my office and have a seat near the fireplace?» She opened a large door and motioned them in.

Harry and the rest of the mates looked around as they walked, easily noticing the difference in look and feel of the school compared to Hogwarts. There was more light everywhere and combined with the lighter walls made the place feel brighter to the soul. Not that they had ever considered Hogwarts depressing, but it had a heavier feeling now that they had seen this. Harry and Hermione had seen the school before and had forgotten about the lighter feeling; Ginny was seeing it for the first time and liked it. Gabrielle had never visited the school before and was full of wonder in getting to go where her sister had.

The trio from Hogwarts also noticed that the décor was very different too. While there were pictures, there were fewer; there were more tapestries instead. The number of suits of armor were also fewer. Completely foreign to Hogwarts, there were large and small granite planters in small alcoves with plants in them. They had also not seen a single ghost yet.

Harry also noticed that the Headmistress's office was near the front door and that it was not hidden away from everyone behind a gargoyle, but the Headmistress was available after a simple knock on her door.

The bond-mates squeezed together on a sofa meant for three adults and waited anxiously as the Headmistress pulled her wand out and silently cast several white spells around the room for privacy. She then sat in a slightly large chair that matched her frame and leaned forward to the table in front of everyone.

«I have coffee, tea, and orange juice.»

Harry, Hermione, and Ginny took tea, while Gabrielle took the juice. Apolline asked for coffee, which the Headmistress poured for herself too.

«Now, what do you feel must be discussed first?» Headmistress Olympe Maxime looked at them all with interest. She looked at Apolline and was surprised when the woman looked at Harry.

«Headmistress, I don't believe this will affect our education here in any significant way, but we felt it was important that you know something about us.» Harry took a deep breath before he said, «I have an unusual magical power that I need to keep hidden, but because I have that power, I also have an unusual situation to deal with. This knowledge is hidden by Fidelius charms. Hermione?»

The Headmistress looked very surprised, but did not say a word.

Hermione shared her secret, followed by Ginny, and then by Gabrielle.

«So you see, Headmistress, we have a special relationship and where I go, the others will go too.» Harry paused at seeing the Headmistress's contemplative look, but he continued on when she did not immediately say anything. «We know our being together will be noticed sooner rather than later and that it might cause problems. While we'd rather not share the girls' secrets with the rest of the students, we are willing if that will make things easier.»

The Headmistress looked at Apolline, who nodded. «And how did this happen, because this sounds very, very unusual.»

Harry appreciated that she was approaching the situation so evenly. «I suppose you do deserve to know that as well, as you could then

help to prevent me from bonding anyone else.» Harry shared his secret with her.

Hermione gave a brief description of her ordeal with the troll. Ginny talked about the diary and basilisk. Gabrielle added a few details about the second task.

Headmistress Maxime nodded slowly. «I now see why you wanted to come here, and why you mentioned the lack of safety at Hogwarts in our previous conversation. Have no fear, we have had nothing like any of that here at Beauxbatons during my time as Headmistress. In fact, I believe you would have to go back to near the founding of this school to find such perilous times. I do not believe you will bond a fourth young woman here. However, you do have a unique situation...» She trailed her comment off with a thoughtful look.

«We would prefer not to tell everyone here our secret, if possible. Do you know of a way because we can't think of any other?» Hermione asked her.

«It is unique, and yet, it's not too dissimilar from events in the past if we go back far enough ... and it's also the truth in a way, just not the whole truth,» Maxime said softly, thinking out loud. She nodded to herself once and brightened a little, returning to her normal voice level. «Yes, I can understand your not wanting to share your secrets. Once some hear of them, they might wonder how to join you and I would believe you would not want that. Yes?»

«Yes,» all of the bond-mates answered.

Maxime looked to Apolline. «What would you think if we announced that these four were in arranged marriages due to old family obligations from a previous generation? While arrangements are not common here, they are also not unheard of. The fact that three of them come from England, a culture we study only lightly here, would hide the truth nicely. The only difficulty would come with the addition

of your daughter, and how she came to be arranged.»

Apolline nodded. «Yes, that might work and I see the difficulty. The Delacours have not practiced arranged marriages for at least the last four generations and probably longer, plus how would our families have met being from different countries.»

«And why Gabrielle and not Fleur, who is the oldest?» Hermione added.

«Can we not tell the truth?» Gabrielle asked. «I became attached to Harry because of the Triwizard Tournament. There was magic involved that no one can explain, much like there was magic that forced Harry to be in the Tournament when he didn't want to. We can also say that it is something we do not want to talk about.»

«People will talk about it anyway, but it would serve as an explanation that they can understand.» Maxime looked at them all.

Harry saw small nods from his bond-mates. «We can agree to that.»

«I and my husband can as well,» Apolline agreed.

«Then we have a solution to the problem.» Maxime looked at each of the students. «I also thank you for telling me the truth so I can help you. Is there anything else special to discuss?»

«No, other than the usual need to watch over Gabrielle because she is a Veela,» Apolline replied, receiving a nod from the Headmistress, «although I'm sure Harry will do an admirable job. If you'll let me sign the papers for registration, I'll leave and not be in the way of the tour and exams.» A few minutes later, Apolline gave the bond-mates a quick hug and left via the main Floo.

Headmistress Maxime led the students around the school, letting them look in various rooms as they desired. The most different

aspect from Hogwarts was the number of extra teachers. Most subjects had three teachers and some had four. Hermione was happy because it allowed for smaller class sizes and more individual instruction. The Headmistress also led them to one of the dorm areas on the third, and top, floor of the wing.

«Each major wing of the building has a dorm area on the top floor and this is the dorm area for the Red group, or as some call it, the house of Fire. As you may have heard from Fleur, the school is divided into four groups, each named after the primary color of an element of magic: White for air, Blue for water, Brown for earth, and Red for fire. Normally, we allow the students to pick what house they want until it is full for that age group, causing the houses to have about the same number students for each year. We start with the older students, those who want to switch houses each draw a number for the order of their choice. They can change houses through the years, or stay in the same house their entire time, and most do stay in their original house. Because all the choosing is done at the end of the year for the next school year, I shall assign you to the Red group because it is presently the smallest for your year.» She directed them around the large room.

«As you can see, there are a lot of tables for studying, as well as sofas and chairs around low tables for discussion or quiet reading. Or even games if all of your studies are complete,» she added with a smile before pointing to a door. «Each dorm area has dedicated chaperons to help you as needed, whether in school or personal matters. The chaperons are always a married couple and teach no classes. Don't worry about them being around you all the time. They are charged with being available and making random appearances. You may think of them as an aunt and uncle.

«The two double doorways lead to the corridors for the sleeping areas,» she pointed them out, «one for young men and one for young ladies. You may go look at one of each, if you like - although they are identical.»

The four each looked at one dorm room in each corridor, three of them finding it interesting that there were no charms to keep boys out of the girls' area - or the reverse. They were similar to the dorms at Hogwarts, although each room only slept four students.

«Are the rooms set aside for a specific year?» Hermione asked.

«No, any four students may share a room, although most rooms are filled with students from the same year. The exceptions are usually siblings.»

Ginny pointedly looked at Hermione, who gave a "you do it" gesture back at her. With a sigh at her suddenly shy bond-mate, she turned to the Headmistress. «Since it will be known that we are arranged, do you have separate quarters for that and is it possible for us stay in one?»

Maxime looked at them for a moment before she let out a deep chuckle. «I suppose I should have expected that, given that you are about to be sixteen through fourteen.»

«And twelve!» Gabrielle injected.

«I see the Delacour independent streak is alive in you as well,» Maxime said with mirth. «We do have a few married quarters for the unusual times that older students marry before they leave us.» She led them over to a door next to the chaperones' door. «Only because you are...» she struggled for a moment in choosing her words before she said, «magically married would I even consider this.» She led them into what looked like a small apartment.

The bond-mates noticed a small kitchen area in the corner, suitable for preparing hot drinks on the single burner. There was also a small sink and few cabinets. Small snacks could be prepared here but a normal meal for four would be a challenge in the limited area. There

was a nice living area with a small fireplace, as well as a table that would seat four for dining and for homework. To the side was a door to a decent-sized bedroom and a door to a bathroom. It would be a cozy place for a couple, but too small for the four of them.

«Headmistress?» Hermione looked at the tall woman with an almost pleading look. «You said you had a few of these quarters. Do you have two of them side by side and could a door be opened between them, along with maybe a few small changes to better serve four of us? Because of the extra work, we'd be willing to stay here for the rest of our time to make it easier.»

Maxime looked at her for a moment before she chuckled and smiled again. «Perhaps. There is another room like this next door that is also unoccupied. What did you have in mind?»

Hermione pulled out her small notebook and a pen and began to sketch on the table. Gabrielle sat in a chair and looked on, while Maxime stood behind Gabrielle and looked down.

Harry went over to the window and looked out over the grounds, leaving the room situation in Hermione's capable hands. He did wonder how long she had been thinking about this sort of thing as she seemed very prepared for the idea of them living together here at school. He felt Ginny come up behind him and put an arm around his waist, looking out the window with him.

«What do you think?» she asked.

«It's all so very different from Hogwarts, and yet ... and yet I will enjoy it here as long as we make a few friends.»

«I like what I've seen so far,» she told him before dropping to a whisper. «I know she's trying her best to make us like it so we'll come here. What do you think school will really be like once it starts?»

He understood her caution - about the school and the conversation - and glanced over his shoulder to see the other three still at the table talking. Also whispering, «If you remember, our tutor Luci was a little wary of us at the beginning; but we got along with her and were even her friends before we left after the second task.»

«You're right.»

Harry looked over again and saw that the other three were still busy, so he leaned down and quietly gave Ginny a short kiss. «I'm sure it all will work out.» He saw her smile and give him a mischievous look for the kiss.

«Harry?» Hermione called, causing him and Ginny to walk over. «What do you think of this?»

He looked at the sketch she had made for a moment. «I would be fine with that. I'll assume you and Gabrielle are fine with it too. Ginny?»

«Yes, I think that could work well.»

Hermione tore the paper out of her notebook and handed it to the Headmistress.

«I'll make the structural changes and let the elves do the rest,» the Headmistress said. «I believe we're done here and there is one more thing to show you before lunch. I believe this will affect you the most, Miss Weasley, as you're the only one taking Muggle Studies at the moment.»

«I am,» Ginny answered as they were led out of the Red group area.

«Headmistress?» Hermione asked to get her attention. «You haven't mentioned anything about how the houses compete against each other.»

The woman chuckled deeply again. «No, I haven't because it is different here than at Hogwarts. The houses here are to create smaller groups to live together and for a surrogate family. It is also so you have a group to help you in case there is trouble. However, the groups do not compete against each other for something like your House Cup at Hogwarts. The groups also help to define who can play on which of the various team sports and clubs, but there are no house points awarded here as at Hogwarts.

«You are expected to participate in class. If you cause trouble, you will be given demerits. For every three demerits you will have to perform a work for the school that usually lasts for two or three hours - and I monitor the demerit list most carefully. Ten demerits will cause you to be sent home for a week, with me accompanying you for a conversation with your parents. Twenty demerits in a single year will cause you to be expelled permanently, although I doubt I will have to worry about either of those last two with any of you. I'm sure you'll be happy to know that I've never had to expel anyone, and I've only had to suspend one student in my thirty-two years as Headmistress.»

«Thank you,» Hermione said, sounding a little lost. One of her favorite activities, earning points for her house, did not exist here.

Down on the ground floor, the Headmistress led them to a special corridor. «The classrooms in this area are for Muggle Studies.» She opened a door that had a sign over stating: The Village. Inside the doorway was black. «It's a portal to another part of our property, just step through it.»

They all stepped through one at a time. To the older students, it was like passing through the portal at Kings Cross to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. They found themselves under a covered pavilion with two small houses on the left and two small stores on the right, all of which would fit in a small country town in England or France, depending on the architecture. There was also a small automobile in the driveway of

one house.

«This is on the edge of our property and our wards are minimal here, so please do not come here without a teacher,» Maxime told them.

She had barely finished speaking when a middle-aged wizard Apparated in with his wand drawn and held ready. He lowered it when he saw her. «Headmistress, I was not aware anyone would be here today.»

«My apologies, Pierre. I should have warned you that I was giving a tour today. Students, this is M. Pierre Lammon, part of our security staff.»

The four greeted him and he returned the greetings before Apparating away.

«As you can see, we have security here and they do monitor the Village we have constructed.» She turned to face the buildings. «Now, I was going to tell you that this is a new addition to our school, built about a year and a half ago. By being under minimal wards, we can make fully functional Muggle houses and businesses. They have electricity and most items found in a normal environment. It was paid for and built by some Muggle-born alumni who thought we should teach more realistically. So far, it has been well received and the overall grades in Muggle Studies have increased since it has been added.»

«I have enjoyed staying at the Grangers' Muggle house so I know what one is like,» Gabrielle said, «but this makes me want to take the course.»

The Headmistress smiled. «You may do so when you reach your third year. I can say that enrollment for Muggle Studies has increased since this has been built. Come, let us return to the main building of the school for lunch.»

They had lunch at a round table that sat twelve. Joining them were a few of the professors that would be testing them.

That afternoon, they started on the exams: first year end-of-year exams for Gabrielle and fourth year end-of-year exams for the other three. After dinner, the three older ones also took the Astronomy exam and practical portion after it became dark.

After their last exam on the first day, they returned to the Red group's common room to find Gabrielle reading one of Ginny's romance books for fun. Harry gave each a hug and kiss good-night before going to the first boy's room to fall into an exhausted sleep; the girls were similarly exhausted and went to the first girl's room. None of them wanted to push any rules and get into trouble by sleeping together - before they had their private rooms.

The rest of the week was easier: one subject in the morning and one subject in the afternoon.

Friday afternoon, the Headmistress led them to the room they would be staying in during the school year. «I hope this will work for you.»

They walked in to see a room much like Hermione had drawn. The first room had very little changed, except that the bathroom no longer opened to the main room, but to the bedroom. There was also a door in the right-hand wall. Walking through it they found three bedrooms and an over sized bathroom that three girls could share and not get in each other's way, as well as a small common area with another study table.

«It's wonderful,» Hermione gushed while the others enthusiastically nodded, «but we don't know if we passed or not. What if we didn't?»

The Headmistress chuckled. «Mlle Granger, I have not been informed about your exams that were taken today, but all of you have

passed the rest of your exams and with high marks. Therefore, I have no doubt the exams taken today will be passed as well.»

«I told you that you'd do well,» Harry said joyfully as he gave Hermione a hug, then Ginny and Gabrielle. He turned to the Headmistress. «Is there anything else we need to do before we return in September?»

«There are a few papers for you to take with you and to sign, along with your parents. Follow me please.» She led them back to her office, where she handed them a stack of forms, which included their book lists. She also found a new sheet on her desk and smiled when she saw it. «Your final grades.» With a flourish of her wand, she transferred them to four different pieces of parchment before giving one to each student.

Harry saw he made all Outstandings, except for History and Arithmancy, where he made Exceeds Expectations. It was no surprise to him that Hermione made all Outstandings, except for her Exceeds Expectations in Defense. Ginny made Outstandings except for Exceeds Expectations in Ancient Runes, History, and Muggle Studies. Gabrielle, having the shortest time to study since she started trying to learn her first year material at the beginning of March, made Exceeds Expectations in all subjects except for Defense and Charms, where she made Outstandings. They were all happy with their scores.

«You have achieved your goals,» Maxime said with a smile. «Gabrielle will begin the second year and the rest of you will begin the fifth year. Please owl me the signed forms by the first of August, which includes permission to draft your Gringotts vault for the stated tuition amount. Other than that, you may travel to Beauxbatons however you wish as long as you arrive between one and six in the afternoon of the third of September. Dinner will start promptly at half past six.»

The Headmistress led them back to the main Floo so they could return home.

Back at the Delacours, both Jean-Aimé and Apolline were waiting for them. «How did it go?» Apolline asked excitedly.

«We all passed!» Harry told them, causing the parents to hug them all.

«That is good, because we'll have guests for the weekend,» Jean-Aimé told them jovially.

«My parents?» Hermione gasped.

«They and Sirius, since all three wanted to congratulate you.»

«But why? I mean, we didn't have our scores until just before we left,» Hermione asked in puzzlement.

Apolline chuckled. «Hermione, you should have more faith in yourself and all of you. They knew you'd pass just like we did.»

Hermione looked down bashfully. «Well, I thought we'd pass, but you can't ever really know beforehand.»

They all heard the sound of the Floo flaring and turned to see Fleur coming out, and she was sporting a big smile. «I have the job!» Everyone gave her a hug.

«What will you be doing?» her mother asked as they all settled into seats.

«I was hoping for a full-time job as a Curse Breaker, but I didn't get that,» Fleur told them, only a little disappointed. «Instead, I'll be working with some of their more important clients - especially those who don't like working with goblins - and coordinating banking

activities for them. In addition, if they need cursed objects worked on, I'll be doing that for them, and be training to be a full-time Curse Breaker. I might also travel to some of their other branches to do work there at times for similar reasons. They said that with hard work I should be trained and able to transfer to the Curse Breaker job I want in about two years. The pay isn't as much as I'd like, but it's enough to have my own small flat in Paris and all I need to live with a little left over.»

«Or you could stay here and Floo to work every day to save your money,» her father pointed out.

«Perhaps,» Fleur acknowledged, although she did not sound thrilled with the idea. The girl missed the amused and knowing smile of her mother.

After dinner, they talked about Beauxbatons some more, with Jean-Aimé telling about his days there as well. Apolline did not go to Beauxbatons, being raised in the Veela colony, but she had visited the school many times during Fleur's years there.

At bedtime, Harry spent some time with Gabrielle, snuggling and telling her how proud he was of her for her good exam scores. His time with Ginny was spent mostly snogging with some time talking about how he felt about it all. Time with Hermione was half talking and half snogging. He also was a little adventurous and let his hands roam from her back down to the top of her derrière. Hermione surprised him by not only not protesting, but by doing the same to him.

Saturday morning, Dan, Emma, Sirius, and Remus arrived, the werewolf being available to come only at the last minute. They were very happy for the bond-mates for doing so well on their exams. Forms for school were signed and sent to the Headmistress. Everyone was happy for their plans working out.

A month later and the day of Harry's birthday, the bond-mates all packed a small bag to get ready for their day trip. Harry was excited and wore sandals for the first time. He felt a little naked without his wand, but it could not be helped at the moment.

Apolline also packed a bag, but hers mostly contained their lunch. It also had all of their wands in it. She pulled out a long wooden cooking spoon. «Everyone, come grab hold.» When they did, she touched her wand to the spoon and with a little magic, the Portkey activated. A few seconds later, they all found themselves in a ring of tall bushes.

She looked at them all sternly to impress the seriousness of her message. «Remember, even if this area is fairly isolated and private, Muggles will be present and we must act like them. I have your wands should an emergency arise. If so, come running to me. Otherwise, stay where I can see you and have fun. Oh, and don't forget the suntan lotion, especially you Ginny.» The redhead nodded and Apolline led them out of the hidden area that had a permanent Muggle-Notice-Me-Not ward on it, as this was the preferred beach for those wizards who lived in the area.

As Harry stepped out of the bushes, he got his first look at the ocean, or actually the Mediterranean Sea in this case. He had always wanted to come to a place like this and it was part of his birthday present from Jean-Aimé and Apolline.

They would have a party this evening at the Delacours where Dan, Emma, and Sirius would come, as well as Neville and Luna. The idea was to celebrate all the birthdays today, since only Harry's, Neville's, and Ginny's were during the summer. Their two Hogwarts friends would also be staying for the next week.

Apolline led them across the beach to a place that had a few shady trees together and not many people nearby. Not that there were

many people on this beach, but there were enough that someone else was always in view. She pulled a large towel and small canvas covered frame out of her oversized bag and set them down, so that she would be sitting on the towel and leaning back against the canvas chair back. She watched the kids set their things down about three meters away and in the sun. Their desire to be a little on their own amused her.

A quick look around satisfied her that there were no immediate threats nearby. She was always on the lookout for dangers to her daughter, and now for her three "new children" also, although they were less likely to attract unwanted attention.

The moment she had been anticipating finally happened and she was not disappointed. No matter how much Hermione might doubt herself, the effect of her removing her cover-up was pronounced. Harry froze and stared at her. Compared to many bikinis, Hermione's blue one was modest; but it was obvious that Harry like her in it.

Gabrielle pulled her cover-up off next and Harry did notice. Her red bikini was also fairly modest, but it captured Harry's attention as well. It was all the mother could do not to laugh as she watched the young man try to figure where to look, all without looking like he was gawking - which he was.

Hermione managed to inadvertently resolve his difficulty by handing him a bottle of suntan lotion and telling him to put some on himself. Harry seemed to have a hard time with that as he watched all the girls put theirs on. When she finished, Hermione turned Harry around and put some on his back. Ginny stood in front of him and had him do her back. Gabrielle did the same as Ginny, not wanting to be left out.

With their lotion applied, Gabrielle pulled some plastic buckets and shovels out of her bag and took Ginny down to the edge of the wet sand. Ginny was all smiles as she left with the younger girl, enjoying

her first time at the beach as well.

Hermione laid out her blanket and then laid face-down on it. "Harry, come down and put lotion on my back. Be sure to rub it in well."

Apolline almost laughed as she watched Harry try to figure out how to follow the command without doing something that he thought Hermione would not like. She finally had to hold the magazine she had pulled out in front of her face to hide her amusement.

"Harry," Hermione finally said, taking pity on him, "straddle my body and sit. That will allow you to reach all of my back." He very tentatively did as he was told and sat on the small of her back. "Move further down, Harry."

"Err, you mean..." He did not seem to be able to finish that statement.

"Yes, sit on my *derrière*. It won't hurt me." When he moved, she reached back and unsnapped her top to pull the straps out of the way. "Be sure to get it all so I don't get burned. Take all the time you need."

Apolline realized what the girl was doing and was of mixed minds about it. She finally decided that they were getting older and had been very responsible so far, so she said nothing.

Hermione felt like she could purr at the moment. Harry was doing more massage than anything at the moment and it felt really good. Her plan to move things along between them a little was also working very well. They were, perhaps, going a little faster than she had planned last year, but it was only a little faster she assured herself quickly. "Be sure you go all the way to my bikini bottom," she told him softly, and then felt his hands move in that direction.

"Are you looking forward to the party tonight? This will be your chance to celebrate with your parents," he asked her.

She was pleased that he was able to carry on a conversation while doing this, as it showed he was comfortable with her like this. "That will be nice. Do you look forward to everyone getting together, especially Neville coming?"

"Yes. I'm really curious about his news too. He said it was important."

"Maybe it's about Hogwarts. I'm sure his Gran must have had a Board of Governors meeting by now. Don't forget to do my sides too," she told him to see how brave he was. To her good pleasure, he followed her directions before moving to the top of her shoulders and neck.

After a moment, Hermione realized that Harry was only pressing on her upper shoulders and his hands were no longer moving. Wondering what had gotten his attention, she turned her head from the side to look forward and up, and saw Ginny kneeling on the sand with Gabrielle, facing the other way. Even to Hermione it seemed like the girl had the perfect derrière and legs, which were only made better by the bikini bottom she was wearing.

Realizing that she had made progress today, but that there was still competition that she could not totally win, she told him, "Why don't you go over and spend some time with them, Harry?" She felt his hands suddenly move to the middle of her back.

"I, I can still stay here with you for awhile." He sounded embarrassed.

"You could, but go help them build their sand castle. You could also play with Gabrielle in the water, but be sure you stay in the shallow part so she doesn't get uncomfortable." She felt him shift and then kiss her on the back of her jaw near her ear.

"I'll be back soon and I'll pay more attention to you then."

She watched him walk over and drop in the sand next to Ginny. He was talking with them both, but it was obvious he was checking out the redhead, undoubtedly comparing the two of them. She sighed at the unfairness of life at times. A voice startled her.

"It's hard to share him, isn't it?"

Hermione reattached her bikini bra strap and rose to lean on one elbow to look behind her to Apolline, sitting in her white one-piece, her baby-bump just starting to really show. "Most of the time it's not, but sometimes..."

"Sometimes you wonder if you can hold his attention like the others?"

After a moment, Hermione nodded. "You saw how he just acted, and I could tell Ginny wasn't trying to show off. Then Gabrielle is a Veela and when she grows up..." Hermione sagged and looked depressed.

Apolline patted the sand next to her. "Come over for a few minutes." She watched the young lady, for she was now, move her towel over and take a seat so they could talk a little more quietly. "Hermione, I'm sure you'll think I'm not the best person to tell you this, being a Veela myself, but don't doubt yourself so much."

Hermione looked incredulous at that statement.

"I'm serious. You have nothing to worry about. You were facing the wrong way at the time, but when you took your cover-up off, Harry literally froze as he looked at you and I could see his eyes look you up and down. There was no doubt that he liked what he saw."

"For now," the girl shot back. "In a few years, Gabrielle will grow up and then it will all be over."

"Hermione! Don't be stupid! It's beneath you." Apolline said sharply, although she kept her voice down. At the girl's shocked look, the

woman sighed. "I know you're feeling inadequate, but that's not reality. When you say that, you make Harry out to be a very shallow person, someone who only looks at the outside, and not very loyal ... which is the exact opposite of how he really is.

"Look, Harry is a boy and he will notice pretty girls, which includes you. Yes, Harry notices and watches you, I've seen him do it. He does think you're pretty. I'm also sure that part of that is because of the person you are. Harry notices the part of you on the inside that's pretty too. And in case you've forgotten, Harry is very loyal to you." She watched as the girl hung her head and thought.

"I know you're right, but it's hard to feel that way sometimes."

Apolline patted her hand. "I know it is. It's a burden of girls all over the world."

"But..." Hermione started to object.

Apolline chuckled and stopped her. "It's true for Veela girls too. We have our insecurities too, although they may be a little different from yours."

They both heard a loud laugh and looked up to see Gabrielle squeal in delight as Harry tossed her into the air in waist deep water.

"Give them a few minutes and then go join them," she encouraged the girl. "And Hermione? Don't forget that Harry sees each of you differently. You're each unique and special, and he needs each of you. I suspect you know more than I do, but from what I know of his early childhood, he deserves all the love he can get."

"Thank you," Hermione told her mother-in-law, or that's the only way she could think of the woman. With a lighter heart, she rose and walked to the water, passing Ginny who was still happily playing in the sand as she watched Harry and Gabrielle in the surf from time to

time.

Hermione helped Gabrielle gang up on Harry to dunk him under the short waves. After a few minutes, Gabrielle had had enough of the water and went back to where Ginny was. Hermione pulled him a little further out so he was chest-deep in the water and jumped up to wrap her legs around his waist. When his hands went around her, she kissed him deeply.

Amused, he asked, "I enjoyed that, but what was it for?"

"I want you to know that I love you."

"That's good, because I love you too." He kissed her back as passionately as she had kissed him a moment ago.

She leaned her forehead against his and sighed contentedly, enjoying him holding her and bobbing in the waves. A motion out of the corner of her eye caused her to move her head to see. There was a boy standing in front of Ginny and Gabrielle, and neither girl looked happy. "Harry, I think we need to return quickly."

Harry turned his head and took the scene in. In a split second, he let go of Hermione and made his way back to shore as fast as he could. He saw Ginny give him a look of relief for his presence while Gabrielle was glaring at the boy.

The boy had medium brown hair and looked to be fourth year, or maybe fifth if he was shorter than average. Like all the other boys on the beach, he was only in a pair of swimming trunks. He was also talking in French to Gabrielle and ignoring Ginny.

«Why won't you talk to me? I've been waiting to talk to you...»

«Who are you and what do you want?» Harry said a little gruffly.

The boy turned to him and gave him a look of contempt. «Go away, I'm not talking to you. You have your own girl.»

«Gabrielle, do you wish to talk to him?» Harry asked kindly.

«No. He is being rude and will not go away when I asked him to go,» she said, her voice rising a little in volume in her anger.

Harry looked at the boy. «There is your answer. She wants you to move along.» The boy looked back at him, sizing him up as well as looking dismissive. It was a look he had seen on Draco Malfoy many times.

«I think not, nor do I think you can make me.»

He could not help it, Harry laughed. «Then you are an idiot.» The boy's expression turned angry. «I could make you. But even if I could not, there are four of us here against only you. If that is not enough, then know that her mother is over there watching us, and I know for a fact you do not want to make her angry if you value your life.» Harry kept his eyes on the boy.

The boy glanced towards Apolline and involuntarily took half a step back at what he saw.

«But I will let Gabrielle make you go away so you understand never to bother her again.» Harry looked at the little Veela and smiled.

Gabrielle's eyes widened as she understood. She gave the boy with an angelic look and sweetly said, «It would please me greatly if you left now and did not return here all day.»

Harry let the allure wash over him without effect as he watched the boy's eyes glaze over before he numbly nodded and turned back the way he had come and walked away quickly. Harry dropped to the sand next to his youngest mate and gave her a hug, wondering how

many more times in their lives he would have to defend her. «Good job. You shouldn't do that to someone unless you have to, but for times like this, you have my permission.»

Hermione dropped down to the sand next to Ginny. «Use your power wisely, and that was a good job.» Gabrielle beamed at her.

«Come have lunch,» Apolline called, causing them all scampered over to join her. «Are you all right, my little one?» she asked her daughter.

«Yes. Harry gave me permission to make him go away,» the little girl said smugly.

«Well done,» was all Apolline said before she started to pull the food out of her bag.

The incident behind them, they all enjoyed lunch, talking and laughing. At the end, Hermione whispered to Ginny. With a grin, the redhead grabbed Harry's hand and pulled him up before she pulled him to play in the sea, laughing all the way.

Harry spent more time playing with Gabrielle and then Hermione. When he took a short walk down the beach with Hermione, Ginny made sure to stay close to Gabrielle.

«Gabi?»

«Gin?» Gabrielle said teasingly.

Ginny chuckled. «Today's been a lot of fun, hasn't it?»

«If you don't count the idiot who wouldn't leave me alone, yes.» Gabrielle sat up straight, pausing in her task of lining her ever increasing sand castle with shells for decoration. «It's not fun for me that Harry will not look at me like he looks at you and Mia, but I've

learned I'll have to wait, even if I don't like it.»

«Mostly,» Ginny conceded, but an impish look slowly came over her.

«What are you planning?» Gabrielle asked, knowing that look.

Ginny casually glanced around them to again make sure no one was near. «Have you notice how Hermione has been acting today? She's been a little different.»

Gabrielle dumped some more damp sand for a new tower as she thought about it. «You're right. She's been more ... more forward?» She looked at Ginny who grinned back at her.

«She has and not just today either. We were talking the other night after you had gone to sleep, about what school would be like with our own rooms.»

«I can't wait for that,» Gabrielle said with a large grin, losing her control of her Allure a little.

«Gabi, focus!» Ginny said softly but urgently.

Gabrielle blushed went back to working with her sand after bringing her Allure under control again. «Sorry.» She looked back up very intrigued. «What did Hermione say to you?»

«It's all right, you're getting better at controlling it.» Ginny look around again, trying to be a good big sister and guard. «I asked Hermione why she had pushed to get our own set of rooms and she pointed out to me that there would be no one to tell us not to sleep with Harry there.»

As expected, Gabrielle perked up, a large grin slowly forming.

Ginny's voice dropped to a whisper. «Mia seems more willing now to do, you know, things. She doesn't like to talk about it, but I can easily guess at what she's not saying. We can't be too obvious, but we need to encourage Harry to go a little faster.»

«Going faster helps you, but not me,» Gabrielle whispered back.

«Gabi, think about it. If Harry goes further sooner, it helps us too. However far he'll go this year, we can later point out that we should be able to do the same thing at the same age. That applies to you too.»

«Hmm,» Gabrielle thought about the idea. «So, you mean that if we can get Harry to do something when he's fifteen instead of when he's sixteen or seventeen, then we can convince him and Hermione that we should be able to do it when we're fifteen as well.»

«Exactly,» Ginny said conspiratorially. «And since Harry is a teenage boy...» She looked at Gabrielle to finish it.

«He'll probably go along,» the little Veela said with her own smile, which dropped after a moment. «But how do you know it will work?»

Ginny shrugged as she looked around again and spotted Harry and Hermione returning. «I can't guarantee it, but it is very likely to happen and more so if we try to help it along. But you must remember, we can't be too obvious.»

Gabrielle nodded with a smirk that was anything but innocent.

When the two older ones returned, Ginny convinced Harry to rub her back like he had Hermione's earlier in the day. She made sure to compliment him on his touch.

The rest of their afternoon at the beach was delightful and they all

would have preferred to stay, but they had a party to go get ready for.

At four, a group arrived in the entryway of Chateau Delacour. The bond-mates all greeted Dan, Emma, Sirius, Neville, and Luna. All five were to stay for the next week, so they each had a bag with them.

As soon as Harry finished slapping his best male friend on the back and telling him to leave his bag there, he pulled him through the house towards the back porch. "So, what's your big news that you wouldn't tell me in a letter?" There was no missing Harry's enthusiasm causing Neville to chuckle.

"This is about the conversation we had with your Gran, isn't it?" Hermione asked almost as anxious.

Neville chuckled again and even Luna gave an usual smile. "Harry," he asked, "how do you live with someone who's always right? You mustn't have an ego anymore."

"Well, I do have several people to keep me in line," Harry said good-naturedly as they all sat on the porch, each in their own chair for once. "So? Is Hermione right again?"

"The Hogwarts Board of Governors have made so many changes to the school that it'll be a real shock to many people."

"Do tell," Ginny commanded him, leaning forward in her eagerness.

"Apparently, they solicited letters from recent graduates and talked to some of the other schools - including Beauxbatons - to get ideas. Then they inspected the school, including all the professors. The biggest news is that Dumbledore has been sacked," Neville said with a straight face, waiting for the reaction, and he was not disappointed.

"Yes!" Harry shouted over the girls' "What?"

"Why haven't we heard about it in the newspaper?" Hermione asked.

"Gran said that the Board wanted to wait until the first of August to get everything in order first. So it'll be in the Daily Prophet tomorrow," Neville said before his look turned even a little more joyous. "They also sacked Snape, Filch, Trelawney, and Binns."

The bond-mates sat there with incredulous but happy smiles. Neville told them about the rest of the changes, including that Sprout would now be Headmistress. "So, do you wish you had stayed now?" he asked mischievously.

Hermione and Ginny looked torn, but Harry shook his head. "I'll still miss you mate, but even if Dumbledore has been sacked, he's still in England, so I'll be glad to be here.

Neville looked crestfallen. "I had hoped you'd be lured back." When Luna held out her hand, Neville shook his head with a small grin and fished a silver coin out of his pocket and handed it to Luna.

Hermione harrumphed, but the rest looked amused at their friends betting on the outcome.

"I would have asked for kisses," Gabrielle stated.

"Oh, I get those anyway," Luna said, causing Neville to turn red and all four bond-mates to chuckle or giggle.

The group had fun talking until it was time for dinner. When Sirius walked through the room, Harry pulled him over to the side for a slightly private conversation.

"Sirius, will you teach us to Apparate while you're here this week?" Harry almost begged. He had noticed that his godfather rarely denied him anything, especially when teaching magic.

However, Sirius looked torn about this one and contemplated his godson for a long moment. Clapping his hand on Harry's shoulder, he said gravely, "I think we should wait until next summer." When Harry started to beg again, he hurried on. "You're only fifteen now and they normally don't teach it until you're about to turn seventeen, so my conscious can take teaching it when you've only just turned sixteen. Also, there's the safety issue. If you don't fully grasp it while I'm here, I don't want you practicing on your own and possibly Splinching yourself, or Merlin forbid, one of the girls doing it and you having to deal with the fact that you have to watch them suffer until help can come."

Harry hung his head and nodded slowly, understanding that Sirius did have a good reason to tell him no. He would be devastated if the one of the girls Splinched herself.

"I'll tell you what, I'll plan to be with you for two weeks next summer and that will be the focus of our time together. I'll even try to get Moony to come along and help. How's that?" Sirius looked at him hopefully.

Harry's face lit after his dejection. "That'd be brilliant," he said as he moved forward and gave his godfather a hug, which Sirius returned, slapping his godson on the back.

After Sirius had left the room, Harry walked back over and sat down on the sofa. While the others had continued to talk, it had been impossible for the others not to overhear parts of it.

"Good try," Ginny said softly with a grin.

After dinner, presents were exchanged between all the teens since only Neville, Harry, and Ginny had their birthdays in the summer. So they celebrated all six birthdays on Harry's day, and essentially Neville's since it was only yesterday. Gabrielle made a big show of her present from Harry: a three compartment trunk just like the other

bond-mates already had. There was also cake and ice cream and lots of talking and laughing.

At bedtime, Apolline showed Neville and Luna to the guest bedrooms, one floor above the Delacour family, on the second floor. Dan and Emma, as well as Sirius, had their own rooms on the second floor.

Down on the first floor with the Delacours, the bond-mates all changed into their pyjamas. As Harry was about to crawl into bed, Hermione slipped into his room and grabbed his hand, pulling him quietly back to her room.

Harry was surprised by that, although he was very appreciative of her birthday kisses. He was also surprised that she spoke very little, acting more like Ginny normally acted. He spent a good twenty minutes with Hermione kissing, as well as caressing her back, sides, and derrière. Not once did she try to stop him and she returned the same.

The door opened and a little blonde head came in. «It's my turn,» she said imperiously as she grabbed Harry's hand from Hermione's hip and pulled him out of the room. Harry barely had time to blow a kiss at a silently chuckling Hermione, a sight that he enjoyed and planned to do again soon.

Gabrielle took him to her room and shut the door. Inside, she pushed Harry onto the bed and then crawled into his lap and gave him a hug, but not let go so she could hold him and let him hold her. They whispered into each other's ears, talking about the day, school, and Gabrielle wishing she was old enough to be doing what Hermione was, causing Harry to chuckle and kiss her cheek.

She worked up her nerve, which was not all that hard, and whispered, «I bet Hermione would do a little more if you wanted.»

Harry pulled his head back and looked at her, questioning her

statement in his mind. «Do you really think so?» he asked unsure of his own guess to that question.

Gabrielle almost grinned, but held it back. «She is about to be sixteen and I could see that she liked your hand on her hip.» She avoided the question, trying to maneuver him to the idea she and Ginny wanted - which she did not feel was a bad thing as they all would benefit from it.

While Harry thought about that, the door opened and Ginny came in. When Harry looked at the door, Gabrielle grew bolder still and craned her neck forward and gave him a chaste kiss on the lips. Harry pulled his head back to get away from her, but she impishly grinned at her victory - or really both victories. He shook his head and she crawled around him to her bed and pushed him up from behind.

Silently laughing, Ginny grabbed his hand and pulled him out of Gabrielle's room, and to his surprise, into his room and shut the door. She maneuvered him to his bed and then lay down beside him, propped on one elbow. The first thing she did was to give him a searing kiss before she leaned back up and looked at him. Lightly, she ran her fingers over his chest.

"This has been a great birthday," Harry said with a large and sort of goofy grin, as if unable to believe his good luck.

She lightly kissed him before saying, "I expect some special time on my birthday, as I'm sure the others do too."

"I'll be happy to," he said as he snaked his arm under her to reach her back, and force her to lean down for another kiss, which she happily gave.

"So," Ginny started to ask with eye practically glowing with excitement, "did you like what Hermione had to tell you tonight?"

"She didn't say much of anything," Harry told her, pulling her down for another kiss.

Ginny's look turned to one of puzzlement after the kiss. "She didn't tell you what we had decided?"

"What have you decided?" he asked, not pulling her down for a kiss now.

She closed her eyes and slowly shook her head, causing Harry to concentrate on her hair and the motions it was making.

"I thought she'd really do it after the way she's been acting today," she muttered.

"What?"

At his confused expression, she decided she was going to have to be the one to explain and wondered if Hermione had done this on purpose.

"I don't know if you've realized it, but Hermione is somewhat shy when talking about," she paused and did her best not to blush, "intimate things." She noted that Harry still looked confused. "Haven't you noticed that the closest she'll get to discussing what we'll be doing is talking about our schedule? Or does she talk about what you two will be doing when it's only you?"

Harry was still wondering what they were talking about until she said "our schedule". He was able to avoid blushing on his own by looking at the ceiling. Clearing his throat quietly, he said, "No, any discussion of that, err, nature has always been, err, non-verbal. And no, we haven't done anything that you and I haven't done." He finally looked at her face. "So what did you and her talk about?"

Studying him for a moment, she decided that she was going to have

to meet the dragon head on. "Will you let me say everything before you respond?"

He nodded.

"Right," she said, looking across the room for a moment to draw in her courage before looking at him. "The most important part is that we want you to know that it's all right and that you don't need to feel embarrassed when you touch us accidentally, whether in normal activity or when we sleep together." When he looked confused, she knew she would have to say it. "There have been times when you've had your hand on our breast, normally when we sleep together. Hermione and I don't mind and it is ... pleasant, although it would be inappropriate for Gabrielle for the next couple of years."

Harry's eyes had gone wide as she became more specific. "I, I, I," he stammered, not able to say anything meaningful because his brain had shutdown.

Ginny grinned and put a single finger over his lips. "Shush, I'm not done. Now, we know you didn't mean to do it, that's why I said accidentally. The two of us are getting older and we're fine with it." And she was fine with only the occasional touch, although she was mostly certain she was not ready for it to go any further at this time - although maybe by Christmas...

She grinned now as she realized she had the perfect opportunity to help her and Gabrielle's plan along. "That leads me to another thing you need to know. I know that you noticed Hermione being more forward today."

Not wanting to say anything, he nodded.

"She won't say it, but she's planning to giving you a belated birthday present, which you should consider working on too so that you can return the favor and give it to her by her birthday."

"Huh?" This was such a confusing conversation to him. Why couldn't she just plainly say it, he asked himself, forgetting how embarrassed he was by her bluntness only a moment ago.

"Harry," she said disappointedly, "what's the next step in the relationship, in becoming more intimate?" When he did not immediately answer, as clinically as possible so as not to become embarrassed, she said, "She wants to do a little exploring with you, without wearing shirts."

He now understood and blushed at her frank description.

She mentally laughed at his embarrassed expression, yet one also filled with desire. She ruthlessly repressed the question of wondering if he was be as desirous of that part of their relationship when the time came. Ginny knew she barely filled her A-cup bra while Hermione would probably have to get C-cup bras on their next shopping trip. She was only about to be fourteen, so there was the chance that she still might grow into a B-cup. Instead, she consoled herself with the fact that Harry liked to run his hands over her derrière when they were alone.

Harry had tried to respond several times while Ginny had been thinking and finally replied very dryly, "I, I think that would be, err, lovely."

She almost laughed at his enthusiastic expression contrasted with his severely understated tone. "I'd suggest you work up to it, letting those accidents become a little more frequent so that it's a natural thing to do by the time her birthday comes. We'll be at school and in our new rooms, so it should easy to do."

With a grin and a self-assured look, he slowly nodded, plans whirring through his mind. He was so caught up in considering the rapturous event, he was surprised completely when Ginny passionately kissed

him. His surprise was only momentary before he fully responded to her.

When she finished the kiss, she leaned back up. "Unfortunately, our time is about at an end." She kissed him deeply once more before getting up and opening the door slightly. By the time she had returned and snuggled with him again, the door opened fully and two other girls came in, closing the door behind themselves.

Ginny whispered very softly as she only had a last couple of seconds to say something for his ears only. "Don't tell her before you do it." She was pleased that he only nodded his agreement.

"Happy birthday again," Hermione said as she slid under the covers, giving him a quick kiss.

«Happy birthday,» Gabrielle told him as she slipped in and between him and Ginny, placing her head on his stomach.

«Thank you Mia, Gin, and Gabi. This has been the best birthday ever,» he told them honestly.

«It will be better still one day,» Gabi told him, causing light giggles from the other two, and forcing Harry to suppress a groan.

To keep them all out of trouble, the girls quietly arose at dawn and returned to their bedrooms.

Chapter 29 - Beauxbatons

Harry looked around his room one last time to ensure he had everything before he left for school; the girls were in their room doing the same. It was the first Sunday in September and the day all Beauxbatons students were to report to school; it was time to leave on a new adventure.

He felt three small objects as he ran his hand over his left pocket; they were all just alike. The thought of them made him nervous and yet giddy at the same time. Sirius had helped him buy them a couple of weeks ago.

Sure that he had everything, pulled his wand out and floated his trunk downstairs. They would be using the Floo to travel to school. It was perhaps not quite as fun as the Hogwarts Express, but it was much more efficient. Jean-Aimé had explained to him that there were designated Floo points around country for those who had no Floo at home, like Muggle-borns. Those from other countries traveled to Paris and then used the Floo from there. A few students each year used a Portkey to the school's front gates or their parents Side-Along Apparated them to the gates.

His parents and Sirius gave him with a hug, already starting the good-byes. They had traveled to the Delacours for the weekend.

A moment later, the three girls came down, each floating her trunk behind her - although Gabrielle was struggling a little with the charm she would not be taught officially until later this year.

Before the good-byes could start full force, Harry cleared his throat lightly to get everyone's attention. "If the rest of you will excuse us for a moment, I need a few words with the girls before we go." He gave Hermione a nudge towards the back door and pointed in that direction. She gave him a confused look, but he just smiled knowingly and grabbed Ginny's and Gabrielle's hands, pulling them

along in that direction. Opening the back door, he ushered them onto the back deck and then closed the door behind them.

"What's going on?" Emma asked for the two sets of parents; Sirius was grinning like a loon.

"I think watching them will give you a good idea," Harry's godfather said, "but if you don't tell them I did this, I can make it so you can listen."

"Please," Apolline said quickly, with the other adults nodding their agreement.

Sirius put a spell on the back window and suddenly they could hear sounds from the back deck as if the window were open.

Harry positioned the girls so they were facing the windows of the house, with Hermione on the left, Ginny in the middle, and Gabrielle on the right end. Anytime one of them asked what he was doing, he simply put a single finger on the girl's lips and said, "Be patient for a moment."

When they were all in a line and looking at him nervously, trying to work out what he was doing, Harry reached into his left pocket and pulled out the first special item. Kneeling down on one knee in front of Hermione, he grabbed her left hand as she gasped, wide-eyed.

Slipping the thin gold ring with a one-carat emerald on it over the tip of her ring finger, he said, "Hermione, I give you this ring to show that you are special to me and as my promise that one day I will ask you to marry me. In the meantime and in the traditions of Magical Society, let this ring show anyone who asks that you have my heart, you are my intended, and you are not available for any other wizard. Do you accept?"

Hermione's nervous nod was all Harry needed, so he slipped the ring

the rest of the way on her finger. The band slowly shrank until it was tight enough to stay on, but not too tight.

Harry stood and was engulfed in a tight hug. He hugged her back just as tightly and very softly whispered, "I love you my Mia."

She somehow hugged him tighter still and whispered, "I love you too, Harry." When they let go, she grabbed his face and gave him a kiss.

He caressed her face gently when she pulled back, giving her a caring look as the first tear of happiness started to run down her face.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled another ring out and moved over to Ginny, who was looking at him with watery eyes and nervous energy. He knelt in front of her too, but she pushed her left hand to him before he could reach for it.

With an amused and knowing look, he told her, "Ginny, I give you this ring to show that you are special to me and as my promise that one day I will ask you to marry me. In the meantime and in the traditions of Magical Society, let this ring show anyone who asks that you have my heart, you are my intended, and you are not available for any other wizard. Do you accept?"

"I do," Ginny said softly, her voice cracking with emotion as a huge grin broke out on her face.

As he rose, Ginny threw herself to Harry and kissed him passionately as they hugged. When their lips parted, she whispered, "I love you, Harry."

"And I love you, my Gin."

She quickly kissed him again and then stepped back, tears of happiness flowing freely.

Harry pulled out the third ring as he stepped over to Gabrielle, who was practically bouncing with excitement and thrust her left hand at him before he could even finish kneeling. He took her hand with a grin and then told her, «Gabrielle, I give you this ring to show that you are special to me and as my promise that one day I will ask you to marry me. In the meantime and in the traditions of Magical Society, let this ring show anyone who asks that you have my heart, you are my intended, and you are not available for any other wizard. Do you accept?»

Instead letting him move the ring the rest of the way on, Gabrielle pushed her hand forward so the ring settled into place resized itself to her slender finger. She also pulled him up and then threw her arms around him.

Harry held the girl to him tightly, resting his chin on the top of head for the moment. «I love you, my Gabi,» he whispered.

«I love you with all my heart, Harry.» Like Hermione, Gabrielle grabbed his head in her hands and pulled him for a quick chaste kiss on the lips.

With a smile playing on his lips, he said, «I suppose this is a special occasion.»

«It is and I've learned how to wait. But when I'm thirteen, I'll show you how to really kiss,» she told him smugly.

He could not help but chuckle. «I'm sure you will.»

Turning to the other two, he opened his arms and they all came together in a group hug.

Emma was dabbing at her eyes, as was Apolline. Jean-Aimé and Dan shared a look that said each understood the specialness of this moment and how privileged they were to have been allowed to

witness it. They were feeling protective over their "little girls", but they each also understood that they could not have found anyone better than Harry Potter to be their son-in-law one day.

Sirius canceled the listen spell as the group outside hugged. A deep breath escaped him as he also considered the moment.

"Thank you, Sirius," Dan said quietly as he put a hand on the man's shoulder.

"I wasn't supposed to tell you before it happened, but I thought you'd want to see and hear it," the godfather said thickly.

"Thank you," the rest murmured to him as they watched their children return, who did not seem quite as young as they did a few minutes earlier.

The girls brushed away their tear as they returned. Gabrielle rushed to her mother and Hermione rushed to hers. Ginny looked a little lost, unsure who to share her happiness with until Emma beckoned her young namesake over.

A very pleased Harry walked over to his godfather, who gave him a hug. "Well done, Harry. The only thing that would have made that better would be if your parents could have been here."

"I like to think they're watching moments like this."

"I'm sure they are," Sirius told him as he ruffled the young man's hair, although it did not change the naturally messy look the lad usually sported.

After the rings were admired and good-byes were said, the quartet traveled to their new school via the Floo network.

They stepped out, one after the other, into minor chaos. It was a little

after three in the afternoon, the time Jean-Aimé had advised them to go - late enough to avoid the bulk of the students who wanted to arrive the minute the school opened at one in the afternoon, but early enough to have time to settle before the Welcome Feast.

One of the teachers took their names, checked them off of her list, and pointed them towards the Red dorms. Harry thanked the woman and they headed towards their room, their trunks floating behind them. About half of the people gave them strange looks, but Harry thought it was just because they were older and no one had seen them here before.

When they walked into the Red dorm area, they saw chaos was here too. There were many people milling around and talking, catching up on their friends' summer. A few of the younger students were running around, although if they went too near an older student, a tripping jinx usually stopped that activity for a few minutes. There were even a couple of boys tossing an old Quaffle between them as they sat on separate couches and talked.

To Harry, it felt like a comfortable place, a place he wanted to be. Looking at his bond-mates, he saw that they were greeting the place with bravery, curiosity, and acceptance.

«Let's find our rooms,» Hermione prompted as she walked to the rooms Headmistress Maxime had set up for them.

Entering, they saw the rooms were as they had been in the summer. With a grin, they each went to their own room and started to unpack. Harry pulled a few extra things out of his trunk: some food for their kitchenette, some books from his family house, and a spare chair and small table (both shrunk) that he planned to use for personal projects that he did not want anyone outside of his bond-mates knowing about. He had a few personal research projects on his mental "To-Do List", and he thought a corner of his bedroom was the place to work on them.

As he carried the snacks from his bedroom to the kitchenette, he heard a knock on the door to their rooms. Setting the food down, he saw the girls came to the internal doorway between their rooms as he answered the main door. A couple in their late twenties greeted him.

«Hello, we're Gaston and Anne Rousseau, the chaperones of the Red dorms. You must be Harry Potter?» the man asked.

«Yes. Err, won't you come in?» Harry assumed that was the polite thing to do and was rewarded with appreciative looks as the couple came in. The girls hesitantly walked into the main room, also a little unsure as to what was expected. «This is the rest of my, uh, family, Hermione, Ginny, and Gabrielle,» he said, introducing them.

The couple politely said hello and walked over to the sitting area, taking the two chairs and leaving the couch for the bond-mates. «As you can guess, the Headmistress told us that there would be a group joining us this year that would reside in the married rooms and we wanted to meet you.»

«Yes,» the woman said, taking over from her husband, «it's unusual for these rooms to be occupied, so we wanted to get to know you a little before classes start. If you have any questions, we'd be happy to answer them for you.»

Harry suspected this was as awkward for them as it felt to him. He looked at the girls, not really having anything to ask about. He was relieved when Hermione broke the silence.

«Thank you,» the brunette girl said, «it's nice to be here. If I can ask, how long have you been chaperones?»

«This is our fourth year as chaperones,» Gaston answered.

«Although we finished our education at Beauxbatons eight years ago,» Anne added. «We enjoy it here and we're saving money for our own home.»

«Are there any extra rules that apply to us beyond what applies to the normal students?» Hermione asked bluntly and hurriedly, as if forcing herself to ask the question.

The couple looked nervously at each other. «Our apologies,» Anne said after a moment, «but this situation is unusual for us. Also, we didn't really expect something like this from students below seventh year.»

Ginny chuckled nervously. «That's all right, we find it a little unusual also.» That seemed to break the ice as everyone relaxed a little.

«To answer your question,» Gaston replied, «officially, there are no extra rules for you. Unofficially, we'd like to ask that you tell us if anyone other than you four sleep in your rooms. While it shouldn't happen, it is possible that a few of the older students might ask to borrow a bedroom and we would prefer if you said no and came to us if they persist. More normally, if you have a friend that you'd like stay with you on some weekend night, we only ask that you tell us before so we don't think someone is missing and we needlessly search for them.»

Hermione smiled and relaxed the rest of the way. «I don't expect that to be a problem and we can do that.» The others quickly agreed with her.

«So,» Anne said with a conspiratorial smile, «the Headmistress said that you're betrothed in arranged marriages?»

Harry decided to jump on this one quickly. «It's not something we really talk much about as it's personal, but the short answer is yes. Even though the legal ceremonies won't be for a couple of years, the

Headmistress is letting us stay together as we are legally betrothed.»

Gaston put his hand on his wife's arm as she opened her mouth to ask more. «We understand and we'll try to stop people from pestering you about it. If you have any question about the school, classes, or,» he grinned broadly, «marriage, feel free to come talk to us and we'll try to help.»

«Thank you, M and Mme Rousseau,» Harry said with a nod.

«No, Gaston and Anne, please,» the man corrected him quickly, «or Uncle Gaston and Aunt Anne if that is easier for you, as we're supposed to all be family here in the Red dorms. When you say M Rousseau, I look for my father.»

The students chuckled with them.

«The feast and sorting of the first years starts promptly at six. We'll be going down about twenty minutes before if you need us to show you the way, although the Headmistress tells us that you spent most a week here,» the man said as he and his wife stood.

Harry nodded. «We know the way and thank you for telling us when we should go.»

«Until later...» Gaston and Anne left.

«They seemed nice enough,» Harry said.

«Anne seemed a little nosey,» Ginny pointed out.

«But I like them,» Gabrielle told them. Hermione agreed.

o-o-o

The bond-mates walked into the Beauxbatons Great Hall for the

Welcome Feast. While it was about the same length as the one at Hogwarts, it was twice the width. The sheer size had impressed Harry during the summer and he was still amazed now. He was disappointed the ceiling was not enchanted to show what the sky was like, but he did like all the windows in the room.

There were many round tables spread throughout the room, each capable of seating eight people. A quick count showed thirteen of them had a «Reserved» sign on them; they were mostly in the half of the room towards the front, or opposite the main doors.

«I think I like the small tables better than Hogwarts few long ones,» Hermione said quietly as they looked around for a place to sit. «We'll have a better chance to meet more people this way.»

«I agree,» Harry said as he led them to an empty table near the front of the room. He wanted to see what would be going on. A few people were sitting at tables, although most were standing around talking near a table. They picked one with a professor they had met during their tests in the summer.

«Professor Girard,» Hermione greeted him for their group as they sat, Hermione on the left next to the professor while Gabrielle and Ginny sat on the right of Harry.

«Hello, it is good to see all of you here.» He looked at his watch. «Take a seat, we'll be starting soon. Did you have a good summer after you left here?»

«Yes, we did,» answered Harry, with the girls all nodding.

A boy with short dark brown hair and a light brown complexion walked up to the table with a blonde girl and a light brunette girl at his shoulders. «Professor Girard,» he said.

«M Santos, Mme Keye, Mme Gallo,» the professor greeted them

cordially as the new students sat, taking the last three seats of a table for eight. He had an amused look as he surveyed the students. "All of you are from the Red dorm. Is there a reason for that?" His look was directed at the new boy more than any other.

Looking a little embarrassed, he said, «We saw them,» he nodded towards Harry and his girls, «in the dorm and we wanted to meet them. It's unusual for anyone to stay in the married rooms.» His look became more direct, looking for an answer to his implied question.

Before any answer could be given, Headmistress Maxime noisily cleared her throat as she walked towards the front of the room. By the time she was in place and facing the students, she had everyone's attention.

«Good evening and welcome to the start of a new school year. I hope everyone had a good summer and is ready to learn and to do your best.»

There was a smattering of applause and couple of «Yes!» shouts. The shouts drew a raised eyebrow and a brief mildly disapproving look from the tall Headmistress. Her initial pleasant look returned after a moment.

«As I am sure many of you are anxious for dinner, we shall start our introductions.» She waved slightly towards the back.

Harry turned that direction and saw the new first years walking towards the front with another teacher leading them.

Professor Girard turned to Harry and the girls and whispered, «You probably don't know since you didn't have to do this here, but each picked a number from a bowl before they came in and that determines their order.»

The four former Hogwarts students nodded their thanks at the explanation.

With Headmistress Maxime looking on and the other teacher prompting them, each student introduced him or herself, said where they were from, and then stated one of the four house colors. The teacher at the front marked their choice down and then sent the student to one of the reserved tables.

Hermione found it interesting that the division between the houses was even enough that it was not until three-quarters of the way through that Headmistress Maxime announced, «The Yellow House is now closed.» That produced a few disappointed looks in the remaining first years who had yet to pick.

As the last new student chose the Blue House and sat, Headmistress Maxime started clapping and the rest of the student body took up the applause.

«Before we start to eat, I have one more set of introductions to make. We have four students transferring from Hogwarts in Great Brittan. M Potter, if you and the ladies would stand and introduce yourselves?»

A little nervous, the four stood and looked around. Harry realized for the first time just how big the school really was. Sure he saw all the chairs earlier, but there were so many faces looking at him.

«Err, hello. I'm Harry Potter. I was born in Britain and will be in the fifth year and we live in the Red dorm.» He gave a weak smile and looked at Hermione.

«I'm Hermione Granger and I was born in Britain. I will also be in the fifth year and...» she hesitated for a brief glance at Harry for confidence, «...and I'm betrothed to Harry.»

There were many surprised looks and even a few gasps.

«I'm Ginny Weasley,» she said, using her birth name to avoid having to explain about Harry transferring her into his family. «I was born in Britain and will also be in the fifth year.» With a deep breath to steel herself, she announced, «I'm also betrothed to Harry.»

The surprised looks returned as did more gasps.

Gabrielle stood straight and said loudly in a proud voice, «I'm Gabrielle Delacour and Fleur is my sister. I will be starting second year and I'm also betrothed to Harry Potter.»

The quartet sat as whispers and soft conversation broke out all over the hall.

The Headmistress shot colored lights out of her wand, causing the talking to trail off. «Yes, this is a very unusual situation. To satisfy your curiosity, Mme Granger and Weasley became betrothed through arrangements by their ancestors. Mme Delacour's betrothal is due to magic that no one can fully explain. That is all the explanation that they wish to share and I ask you to leave it at that.

«With the Sorting done, let the Feast begin!» she said with a sharp double-clap, causing bowls to suddenly appear in the middle of all the tables.

As the food started to be passed around Harry's table and everyone dished out what they desired, it was quiet, unlike at the other tables.

When the silence was almost unbearable, because the four new students did not know what to say, the other boy broke the silence by just jumping on the topic of conversation that everyone else was discussing.

«I'm Philip Santos, from Spain. So, I now understand why you're together, but I thought you had to be married to stay in the married

rooms.» He looked at Harry.

Harry was unsure of what to say to that. A look at his girls showed equal lack of a defense.

Professor Girard came to their rescue. «They are allowed by special permission from the Headmistress after the request from their parents.»

Harry added his nod quickly. «It was at the request of our families and we'll be legally married before we finish school anyway.»

The professor ended the next gap of silence too. «Mademoiselles, could you introduce yourselves too?»

«I'm Sara Gallo from a small town outside of Milan, Italy,» the blonde next to Santos. «I'm also his girlfriend at the moment,» she added with a look that clearly said that Philip had erred by not stating that himself.

The brunette spoke quickly, as if trying to prevent any arguments. «I'm Camila Keye, a cousin of Philip's on our mother's side. We're all in fifth year too.»

Ginny decided she had to know one thing now. «Are any of you on the Quidditch team or do you know if they have tryouts?»

Harry chuckled at her question, thinking that was classic Ginny, or maybe classic Weasley since Ron Quidditch crazy too.

«I am,» Camila spoke up. «I played on the second team last year and will again this year. The first team doesn't have anyone to replace.» She sounded a little sad at the end.

«And tryouts?» Ginny asked again.

«Probably in two weeks,» the professor smoothly answered as he helped himself to a small portion of cake for dessert.

«What will class be like this year, Professor,» asked Hermione.

The slightly graying man chuckled lightly. «For you, the same as every fifth year class, Mme Granger. It will be a time to learn the spells that you need for your OWLs and to finish the basic education. For my class, which I will see all of you except for Mme Delacour who will have another professor, we will finish basic Transfiguration work this term, then concentrate on Conjuring for almost all of the spring term. You will be worked very hard this OWL year,» he finished with a grin.

Harry gulped and noticed that Ginny looked a little nervous; however, Hermione looked quite pleased.

«Every year you tell us it will be hard,» Philip said in easy banter.

«And they were,» Girard said, just casually. «The fact that you did well shows how good a teacher I was.»

The other four laughed, at what Harry assumed was some inside joke. He joined in for a moment to be polite, as did his girls.

The Headmistress stood and called, «May I have your attention?» When everyone quieted down, she continued. «Will the dorm aides please stand?»

Around the room, thirty-two older students stood. Harry noticed they all had a small silver "A" pin on the breast of their robes.

«These are the aides for this year. They have been picked and volunteered to help with information, directions, and act as assistants for the professors as needed. So if you need help, you can seek them out.» She looked at the tables containing the first years.

«The feast is officially over and you may leave when you like, or stay here and visit until curfew. First years, please follow one of the aides with your dorm color or your dorm chaperone back to dorms. Chaperones, please stand to be introduced.» The Headmistress introduced each couple and then bid everyone a good evening until breakfast started at seven the next morning.

«None of you are aides?» Hermione asked the other three.

Sara gave a soft snort as Philip said, «No, we have good grades, but not that good. They normally take the top eight students of the upper three years.»

«Good grades is very important, but there are other factors,» Girard told them as he rose. «Good evening, and I may see some of you tomorrow.»

«Is that when we get our timetables?» Hermione quickly asked.

«No, the aides in your dorm will hand those out tonight, except for first years who don't receive theirs until tomorrow morning when they get up.» Professor Girard nodded and then left.

«I guess we should go too?» Philip said to the group, seeing if they felt the same way. As one, they all rose.

They did not talk much as they returned to their dorm, but Harry noticed a lot of glances from the other students they passed. He supposed he could not blame them too much, but he had hoped to not be singled out too much with extra attention here.

Back at the dorms, six of the aides were handing out timetables as the students came back. Harry and his girls each took their and headed to their rooms.

Inside, Hermione closed the door behind everyone and then put a privacy spell on it to prevent others from listening, but they could still hear if someone knocked. «Harry, I think we need to talk about something.»

«You mean we,» Ginny corrected her and Gabrielle added her agreement with a nod.

«Sorry, we decided that all of us need to talk,» Hermione said with an acknowledgement to the other girls.

«What about?» He could not think of anything that need to be said tonight.

«Our sleeping arrangements,» Hermione told him as she took a seat at their table and beckoned the others to join her, which they did.

«Err, OK. What about them.»

When Hermione hesitated, Ginny spoke up. «You promised after I had to handle the last conversation.»

Hermione blushed and looked guilty. «I know. I'm only trying to make sure I approach this correctly.»

It took Harry a moment, but he realized Ginny was referring to the conversation on his birthday about "accidental touching".

«Harry,» said Hermione, interrupting his thoughts, «you've enjoyed the times we all sleep together, haven't you?»

«Yes, I thought everyone did.»

«We did, so we'd like to continue that here since we have the ability. Of course, to make it fair, we should have a schedule.»

That was classic Hermione, he thought with a grin. «Go on.»

«Because there are three of us and seven days in a week, it seemed most fair for each of us to have two nights a week, then give you the final night to choose what you want to do. So, I could take Mondays and Thursdays; Gabrielle could take Tuesdays and Fridays; and Ginny could take Wednesdays and Saturdays. Then on Sundays, like tonight, you could sleep either by yourself, or with any combination of us.»

«I see.» Harry could see their desire to spend some alone time with him; and truthfully, he thought it was a good idea.

«Also, until Gabrielle is thirteen, Ginny and I could chaperone her. On Tuesdays, I could stay that night too, and on Friday, Ginny could stay. How does that plan sound to you?» Hermione looked a little nervous.

«So, until her birthday next year, there would be two of you on her nights?» Harry asked.

«Unfortunately,» Gabrielle interjected before Hermione could answer. Ginny chuckled at the younger girl's plight.

«I like the idea,» Harry replied. «In fact, we should set a normal bedtime of ten, then the 'alone time' could start at nine, so we have an hour to talk or do something special together, just the two of us.» When he realized how that sounded, he added quickly, «You know, whichever two of us it is.»

The girls all giggled at him. «I think we figured that out, Harry,» Ginny said with a grin. «I also think that is a very good idea.»

«I like it too,» Hermione agreed, as did Gabrielle.

«What about tonight?» Gabrielle asked with a hopeful look on her

face.

Harry considered what to do. «How about we all finish unpacking and getting ready for tomorrow, since we know what classes we have, then all meet in my bedroom at ten?»

He received three smiles as three girls jumped up and hurried off to their room. Gabrielle almost ran while Hermione and Ginny left at a pace only a little faster than normal. He just shook his head and returned to his room to put the last few things in place for the year and pull out the proper books for tomorrow's classes.

As Harry finished getting ready for bed, now dressed in only his pyjama bottoms, Gabrielle walked in in her pyjamas and immediately jumped on his bed, which he had already expanded to be slightly wider than normal.

Harry walked over and sat on the bed, and pulled her into his lap when she crawled over. «You're growing up so fast.»

Gabrielle snuggled into his bare chest. «Not fast enough. This is pleasant, but I want more. I want kisses and touches too.»

«I'm sorry, my Gabi...»

«I know, I have to wait. I know it, but it doesn't make it any easier.»

He looked up to see Hermione and Ginny standing in the doorway watching the scene in their pyjamas. «I know,» he told her lovingly. «I used to wait for someone to come take me away from my Aunt and Uncle and I had to wait ten years. You don't have to wait nearly that long and you get hugs and snuggles while you wait.»

Gabrielle seemed to purr. «At least I have this as I wait,» she agreed wistfully.

Harry reached over and pulled back the bed covers, signaling to the other girls to come in. «I set the alarm for six. Will that be enough time?» He received three yeses.

Moving to the middle of the bed, Gabrielle and Ginny snuggled next to him when Hermione said, «I'll take the outside since I'll be here tomorrow.»

Harry gave them all a simple good-night kiss for their first night in the new school

When the alarm went off the next morning, Harry found his hand on someone's breast. Luckily, it was Ginny's. She gave him a sleepy blown kiss as she rose. Hermione almost had to pull Gabrielle out of bed to get her going, but they all started getting ready for their day.

In the Great Hall, they almost didn't find a table with four chairs together. That led them to the conclusion that they would need to rise a little earlier, or else be willing to be separated - although at the same table. They made a few new friends from the Blue or Water dorm before they left for classes.

Gabrielle went her way and the three older ones left for their first charms class. They had noted last night that whomever scheduled the classes had put them together whenever they were taking the same class.

There were no long tables in class here, but individual chairs with a small table in front of it. They sat at three in a row near the front. They also noticed that the class was mixed with students from all four dorms, unlike what Hogwarts had done.

Only a few steps in front of the teacher, Philip Santos hurried into the classroom and took the seat next to Harry, Hermione and Ginny were both to his right.

«I made it,» the Spanish boy said with an easy grin.

«Barely,» Harry teased back as the teacher closed the door.

«Good morning, I'm Professor Petit for those of you who haven't met me before.» He gave the three British students a cheerful look. «As every professor here will make abundantly clear this week, this is your OWL year and it will be more difficult than any other you've had so far, and second in difficulty only to your seventh year.

«Let's begin by knocking the rust off your work and do a little review today. When we meet again on Thursday, we shall start on Animation of objects before moving to multiple objects late next week.»

The professor handed out sticks about the size of most wands and then called out charms and spells for them to do. While not quite as enthusiastic as Professor Flitwick, Harry decided that he liked Professor Petit. There was no question he knew his field as he worked with them, especially those who had the occasional trouble.

Gabrielle joined them at lunch and she looked a little uncomfortable.

Harry pulled her over to sit next to him at the table. «What is wrong?» he asked in a whisper for her ear alone.

She turned her head to whisper back into his ear. «Nothing. I only have an itch.»

«Where should I scratch?» he asked and moved his hand to her back. She blushed heavily but directed him to scratch her whole back.

«Thank you, that feels much better,» she told him at the end. He wasn't sure that was the whole problem, but he didn't press her any more.

During the afternoon, Ginny went to her Muggle Studies class while Harry and Hermione attended their Arithmancy class. They continued to meet new people and everyone was mostly respectful. A few gave them strange looks and said nothing, but most of the students they talked to gave their name and talked politely, even if it was about trivial things or the class.

The "Potters" arrived at dinner a little early and grabbed a table, this time with Professor Lambert, Ginny's Muggle Studies professor.

Ginny gushed about class and how much she liked it. Harry was happy for her, but noticed that Gabrielle still didn't seem her usual energetic self. She was almost normal, but not quite. Harry wondered what might have happened in her classes, because he knew she hadn't been hurt; he would have felt that.

As they walked back to their rooms after dinner, Harry put his arm around Gabrielle's shoulder. «Are you sure that you're all right?»

For a brief second, he could see she was unhappy, just before a more normal look returned. «No, I'm still uncomfortable. I need to change.»

That alarmed Harry. «Gabrielle,» whispered forcefully, «you can't transform here. Wait until we get back to our rooms.»

Gabrielle giggled at him. «No, not that kind of change. Can I really fix it when we get back?»

«Yes, of course,» he replied, relieved that it wasn't what he first thought. A transformed Veela could be dangerous to others.

The moment they were in their rooms and Harry was closing the door, Gabrielle started changing. She pulled off her outer school overrobes and dropped them before hurriedly pulling off her blouse. Harry turned around just in time to see Gabrielle, standing in just her skirt

and bra and undoing the clasp on her bra. He immediately turned and shouted, "Hermione!"

Hermione, who had been leading them back, was already in the girl's suite. She turned and came back into the main room to see Ginny near the doorway staring across the room in surprise. Looking over, she saw Harry facing the door out of their room and very red, with a topless Gabrielle rubbing her hands all over her upper body, including her small breasts.

«Gabrielle!» she shouted while Ginny started to laugh.

«It's not funny,» Harry said pointedly.

«Is too...» Ginny continued to chuckle.

«Gabrielle, what are you doing?» Hermione asked, unable to figure it out, other than maybe as a prank on Harry.

«I was uncomfortable and he said I could change as soon as I returned,» the blonde said and pointed to their betrothed.

Harry sputtered. «I didn't know she meant that.»

That set Ginny off chuckling again, although she did go over to help the younger girl. «Here, put his on so Harry can turn around again.»

«I don't think he wants to. Maybe he doesn't like me as much as I thought.» Gabrielle sounded sad, almost tearful to Harry.

«There, there now. Chin up, Gabi. Of course Harry likes you that way,» Ginny told her lovingly. «Look at how red he is. He likes you but he's embarrassed to show it.»

«Ginny!»

The red-head giggled. «See how he protests? Boys can be like that, afraid to show how they like you.»

«But he's not that way with you,» Gabrielle argued.

«I can promise you that if I took my clothes off he'd be embarrassed too. You see, he has this noble streak that is so wonderful because you don't find it in many boys, but it also means that he's not going to be as forward as other boys would be too. You have to take the bad with the good.»

«Ginny!»

All three girls chuckled at him now.

«It's safe to turn around now, Harry.»

He allowed himself to turn, because it has been Hermione that had told him, and he trusted her not to take advantage of him in something like this. Sure enough, Gabrielle had her blouse back on, but it was evident that she was developing breasts and that she wore no bra under the tight blouse. Knowing "that change" does not happen overnight, he was not sure how he had not noticed before. He looked up to her face to see her watching him with a longing.

With a sigh, he realized that everyone had overreacted, especially him. «Of course I love you,» he told her as he opened his arms. The short blonde ran to him and gave him a tight hug. «I'm sorry, you surprised me.» He felt her sigh against his chest through his shirt.

«I wished I were thirteen...»

«One day,» he told her. «So, that is why you were uncomfortable and you just wanted to change your clothes?»

«Yes, mother said I had to start wearing a bra everyday now, but it's

been so uncomfortable today. It's very silly since I really don't need a bra.»

«You might as well get used to it, Gabrielle, since you'll need one for years to come,» Hermione told her.

«No, I don't,» the little girl said seriously.

«You do,» Ginny agreed with her older bond-mate. «Even if you're small like me, you still need one, especially when you're exercising.»

«No, I don't because I'm a Veela,» Gabrielle said forcefully, looking like she wanted to stomp her foot to make her point.

«What does being a Veela have to do with not wearing a bra?» Hermione asked, challenging her to explain. «Gravity affects you too.»

«That's because you do not fully understand what it means to be a Veela.»

«Then help us understand,» Hermione told her honestly, wanting to know more. Ginny nodded as well, more curious than anything.

Gabrielle looked at Harry and saw him give her a caring nod. «Tell us,» he encouraged her gently.

«You are a Veela or you're not,» Gabrielle started slowly. «Some people might say that I'm a quarter Veela, but all that really says is how far back in my ancestry you have to go to find a Pureblood Veela. Veela heritage is handed down fully or not at all. It is true that after enough generations the Veela heritage is lost if not given more Veela blood, but until it is lost, we are the same. I will be as strong as my grand-ma-ma when I am old enough.»

«That's very interesting, but what does that have to do with not

wearing a bra?» Hermione said, puzzled.

«Do you not remember my mother saying that Veela are, are...» Gabrielle was turning her hands as if trying pull a word out of the air. «I don't remember the word, but we care more than normal about our looks.»

«Vain?» Hermione offered.

«Yes!» Gabrielle lit up. «We are vain about our looks. We do many things to always look beautiful. I can tell that I'm growing up because I feel like I care more about looking nice for Harry. I care a lot more. We have our own special spells to help us look good, and that's why I don't need a bra.»

«Wait,» Ginny stopped her. «Are you saying that there is a special Veela spell that acts like a bra, but you don't have to wear a bra with it?»

«Yes!»

Hermione still looked puzzled. «Uhh, all right, but that doesn't seem like such a big deal.»

Ginny looked at Harry then at her. «I can see the advantage. Gabi, can others learn this spell?»

«I think so.» Gabrielle looked at Ginny carefully, as if determining if it was really possible. «You would have to swear not to share it with others. Fleur taught me and said that it's only for Veela, but we are bonded, sort of.»

«I swear I won't share this spell with any others,» Ginny said quickly. «Can you show me now?»

«Yes, take your top off.» Gabrielle looked at Hermione. «Do you want

to learn too?»

Hermione looked stuck. It was obvious she wanted to learn, but wasn't quite sure of having to make the promise.

Harry shook his head, amazed at the conversation he had witnessed, and at the fact that Ginny was taking her overrobes off in front of him. «I, uh, I think I'll go out and read for a bit.»

The girls looked at him for a brief moment and then laughed as one.

He grabbed his book bag and hurriedly left the room as the girls migrated to their smaller common room. Out in the dorm's common room, he looked around for a place to sit. Spying Philip, he walked over and sat down next to him and began to pull his work out and put it on the low table in front of them as Philip had done.

«I'm surprised to see you here. Trouble in paradise?» Philip asked.

«No, they're having a girl talk that I want no part of,» he explained, although a small part of him wondered about it. It was unusual to see Ginny that excited about something other than Quidditch, unless it was something to tease him with.

«Understand,» Philip said simply as he finished writing a sentence.

Harry started looking around at the four couches surround the large square low table in front of him and noted that Sara wasn't there, nor was Camila. Looking around some more, he finally became aware of someone he'd hoped never to meet again, and as luck would have it, he was member of the Red dorm at Beauxbatons. The boy was looking at him with wide eyes, surprised to see Harry.

«What's your name?» Harry said coolly to the boy who had tried to get close to Gabrielle this summer on the beach.

The boy studied him for a moment before he caved under Harry's glare. «Jacques Lefèbvre.»

Harry considered calling him a few choice names, but he didn't want to get off to a bad start with everyone here. He also remembered Hermione pointing out to him the next day that the boy couldn't have known about Gabrielle's situation. Of course, the boy had also insulted him as well. He finally decided for a middle ground as the staring contest lengthened.

«M Lefèbvre,» Harry said softly and very seriously. «I am willing to forget about you insulting me, and I will give you the benefit of the doubt that you didn't know about Gabrielle and me at that time, but you will never approach her or speak to her like that again or I will get very angry ... and you do not want that.»

The fourth year boy looked at him for a moment before he nodded, scooped up his things, and then left in a hurry.

Harry leaned back in his seat and relaxed as the confrontation ended. That might not have been his best option, but he felt like it had to be done. He hoped he'd made a statement to everyone that you did not touch Gabrielle.

«What was that about?» Philip asked quietly, although it was obvious that everyone on the couches around him wanted to ask the same thing.

Perhaps an abbreviated version, Harry thought. «This summer, he met us while we were out and he tried to make Gabrielle interested in him. She told him no and I told him no, and still he persisted until we forcefully sent him away. He couldn't have known that we were already betrothed, so I'm willing to not be too hard on him. However, his persistence was unacceptable. A single 'no' should have been enough for him and no one would have become angry. So I guess this was a warning for him not to try anything here.»

Philip nodded and then chuckled for a moment. «I think your warning was received loud and clear.» A few others around them chuckled at that.

«I don't even dislike him. I only don't want him to try anything stupid. Gabrielle is a Veela and she can defend herself in ways that could hurt him. I don't want to see anyone get hurt, whether it's feelings or bodily.» Harry shrugged, not sure what else to say to make himself not look as bad to everyone, as this story would make the rounds. There was no doubt in his mind there.

«Can I ask you something?»

Harry looked the other way to see a seventh year girl that looked a little familiar. «I guess; I might not answer though.»

She gave him an understanding smile. «I'm Marie-Élise and I was at Hogwarts last year. I was barely old enough to put my name in the Goblet of Fire.»

Harry's eyebrows shot up. Now he knew where he'd seen her before.

She smiled at his recognition of her. «What happened to Fleur in the third task? No one would ever tell us. In fact, what happened in the third task of the Triwizard Tournament?»

He hesitated as he decided what to tell them, and there was no doubt many people were listening as the large room was almost quiet. Lefèbvre's exit had steered their attention his way. Deciding that Fleur's point of view might be the best, he raised his voice a little so all could hear him.

«I believe Fleur made no secret of her being a Veela, true?» He looked around and saw heads nodding.

«True,» Marie-Élise agreed.

«So in the first task, she - a being of fire - had to fight a dragon. Does anyone see a problem with that?» He saw one girl's eye's go wide so he pointed to her.

«They are both beings of fire so it would be harder for her.»

«Yes,» Harry confirmed, wondering if she was knowledgeable overall or just about magical creatures. «And in the second task, she had to go underwater. What would that have been like for her?»

«Fire does not like water,» the same girl answered.

«That put Fleur at a great disadvantage. As she told me, if she had known what the tasks were ahead of time, she would not have entered her name.» He noted that many people were surprised, but at least most looks had also changed to understanding.

«And the third task?» Marie-Élise prompted him.

«Even though Fleur entered the maze last, she came close to winning, she was that good. What no one knew at the time was that some ...» he waved his hand as he searched for the translation for terrorist and came up blank. «Some bad, evil men wanted to take me way to use in an evil ritual. To get to me, they attacked both Fleur and Viktor Krum. They were lucky and were not hurt very badly. I was kidnapped, but I managed to overcome my kidnappers and get away.» That was close enough to the truth.

«And the polyjuiced man they found?» Marie-Élise asked curiously.

«He was one of the kidnappers. He was given the Dementor's Kiss,» Harry told them solemnly. «The leader and two other helpers died as well. Cedric Diggory, the Hogwarts champion, almost died, but he was healed. I was also injured in the fighting. It was not a pleasant

evening.» Then there was the kidnapping attempt on Gabrielle; no, it was not a pleasant evening at all. He looked down as the unpleasant memories and emotions of the night washed over him again.

He felt a hand on his should and looked up to see Marie-Élise give him an appreciative smile. «Thank you for telling us. I know I wasn't Fleur's best friend, but I like to think I was one of her friends here.»

«You were,» a voice said.

Harry turned and saw his three bond-mates standing a little ways off.

«My sister told me she considered you a friend,» Gabrielle said.

Marie-Élise smiled. «That's good to know.»

«I hate to break this bonding moment up,» a deeper male voice called out, «but it is time for the first and second years to be heading to bed.»

Harry looked over and saw the Rousseaus leaning against the wall where they had been watching. Based on their expression, they had approved of Harry's tale about Fleur. If they had heard of the small confrontation a few minutes earlier, they did not seem to hold it against him.

The students started to disperse, the younger ones and a few older ones heading for their beds. Harry went over to his mates and walked with them back to their rooms.

Inside Hermione told him, «I'll be over in a few minutes. You might want to take care of anything you need to do in bathroom now.»

He suspected this was her hint for him to go brush his teeth.

«Harry, I'll start exercising at 5:30 if you want to join us,» Ginny

informed him. «I was planning on about 45 minutes.»

«Assuming Hermione doesn't have any other plans for me,» he said teasingly, making Ginny and Gabrielle laugh. Hermione had already left.

Harry left for his room and decided to try an experiment. He called out, "Dobby," as he gave a small clap, their agreed upon signal. By the time he had finished brushing his teeth, Dobby still had not come, convincing him that Dobby could not hear the summons from this far away. That was not a surprise or a problem, but it would have made a few things easier.

A few minutes later, Hermione came in dressed in her pyjamas. She carried a book plus her pen and little notebook. She also closed the door behind her.

"Did you have specific plans?" he asked her, feeling a little strange speaking English after using almost only French for the past several months.

She raised an eyebrow at the language shift, but replied in kind. "I had a few questions for us to discuss. How about you?"

"Only one question; can I go first?"

She nodded her agreement.

Harry took the things out of her hands and put them on the nightstand and pulled her to the bed so they could sit on it. He sat cross-legged on it and gestured for her to join him. As they sat knee to knee, he considered how to ask his question, then decided to just be a Gryffindor - even if he was not one officially anymore.

"Hermione, we've always been open and honest with each other, right?"

She nodded, but started to look a little fearful.

"I don't think you've ever been dishonest with me," most of her apprehension went away, "but I'm curious about something you might not have told me." He reached up with his hand to her face and caressed her cheek, before he slowly slid his hand down with one finger trailing down her throat. She looked him right in the eyes and did not break his gaze as his finger came to rest on top of her pyjama top right between her breasts, although she did blush he noticed.

"Ginny told me on my birthday," he continued, "that you were supposed to talk to me about something, but you never did. As I don't think Ginny has ever lied to me, that means that something changed. What happened?" He let his finger trail back up and over to her shoulder before he caressed her arm all the way down and was holding her hand.

She shivered at his touch, but held his hand tightly. Showing that she was not sure how to answer, she worried her lower lip for a moment. "I was supposed to talk to you, but I chickened out." She finally dropped her gaze. "It really shouldn't have been that hard, but it was."

"I was surprised," he told her. "I always thought you could talk about anything."

With a sigh, she looked back at him. "I can talk about anything, except ... sex. I don't know why, but it's hard for me."

"That seems odd, since you didn't seem to have any trouble talking about our 'schedule'," he pointed out. She had mentioned having sex at seventeen.

"There was a difference. When I did that, I was able to make it sort of impersonal, so it wasn't about me. But to tell you that if you, uh," she

rushed, "if you touched me accidentally," she paused for a breath and continued on more normally, "that became a little too personal. Plus, I was having so much fun kissing you that evening that I didn't want to interrupt that," she admitted a little shyly.

He had noticed that she was acting more like Ginny that night. Deciding to continue being forward, he asked, "So are you really fine if that happens? You know, if we wake up in the morning and my hand is on your chest?" He was sure he was a little pink now, although he tried not to be.

Hermione was more than little pink from his question, but she nodded. "I, uh, I wouldn't mind at all."

"And," he decided to press his luck, "if my hand is there when we go to sleep?"

Her blushed turned deeper, but she kept looking at him. "I don't think I'd mind."

Harry chuckled twice, lightly. "Hermione, this isn't like being hungry where you can be only a little of it. Either you are fine with me doing that, or you aren't. I want to know so I don't cross the line before you're ready."

"You really are too noble for you own good at times. Are you ready for that?" she asked back with no hesitation.

He looked into her brown eyes as he answered, "Whenever you are."

She looked back at him and simply said, "Soon, very soon."

With a grin, he reached over and picked up his wand and turned the lights out. Lifting the covers, he pulled Hermione in and spooned behind her tightly. Then with his hand over her, he reached around and put his hand on her shoulder, letting his arm rest against her

chest. "I love you, Hermione."

All she said back was, "I love you too, Harry."

Harry's alarm went off at 6am the next morning. He had decided to skip exercising with Ginny and Gabrielle, opting to work out with them on days it was not just him and Hermione, which would be four or five days a week. He felt that was enough.

They had another day of new classes and enjoyed all of them, even the one by the History of Magic teacher that had been a little unfriendly to them on their first tour. Headmistress Maxime's talk with her must have worked, as she treated them just like all of the other students. He could only wish things had gone half as well with Snape in his first year at Hogwarts.

They also had potions that day, which Harry thought went rather well. He teamed with Ginny while Hermione teamed with Camila, who had asked for someone strong in Potions to help her. The Spanish girl and Hermione got along very well.

That evening after dinner, the four worked in the common room, as the Rousseaus had encouraged them to work in the common room or library as much as possible, so they would not isolate themselves. The chaperones considered that a negative of having "married rooms".

Gabrielle introduced a new friend from one of her classes, Margot. The dark blonde girl was almost as bubbly as Gabrielle.

When 9pm came, Gabrielle all but dragged Harry back to their rooms, causing Margot to giggle at them. Gabrielle was already in his room in her long sleep shirt when he came out of the bathroom.

«Come hold me, Harry,» she called to him as she sat on his bed.

With a grin, he joined her. "I think we should use English to make sure you don't forget."

She gave him a cute scowl, but told him, "OK."

"How do you like school so far?"

Gabrielle smiled and took his hand in hers. "It is fine. We are ... busy in class."

"I'm glad you made a friend already."

"Me too," she agreed. "I was afraid it would be hard. Fleur said it was hard." She looked at him as she considered the question more. "I think that you helped."

"Me? I promise I didn't. It was all you," he assured her.

Her expression indicated that she did not seem to agree. "Maybe both of us then. Many girls feel ... threatened by Veela, but they know I am already with you. So I am safe because of you."

"I hadn't thought of that," he admitted.

She looked over his shoulder for a moment. "Move to the top of the bed and sit."

Harry was a little surprised, but moved back so he was sitting against the headboard. As soon as he was in place, Gabrielle moved and sat sideways across his lap so he could hold her close to him.

"This is better," she told him authoritatively, causing him to chuckle lightly. "Tell me about Hogwarts," she asked him, and they talked in that position until Hermione joined them at ten.

Hermione let Gabrielle have her choice of positions and she had

Harry lie on his back so she could drape half of herself over him with her head on his shoulder. Hermione took the same position on his other side, effectively pinning him down. However, Harry did not mind.

This time he had set his alarm for 5:30. When it went off, Harry found himself with both arms wrapped around Gabrielle and Hermione only next to him. With a kiss to the forehead, he woke Gabrielle and they both got out of bed to go exercise with Ginny, who almost never missed a day.

After he had changed clothes and walked next door, he saw Ginny in one of her two-piece exercise outfits.

"Morning, Harry. Glad you could join us," she told him as Gabrielle walked into the room, dressed in a one-piece exercise outfit.

"I think four days a week will be enough for me," he told her. She nodded an acknowledgement, not passing judgment good or bad. "You did sound-proof the walls, didn't you?"

"Yes," she answered with a grin. "After the problem I had with my mother when I forgot to silence the floor, I always do six spells now to hold all the sound in. I thought that not everyone might want to be woken up with our music."

"Good idea." He really did not want to get on anyone's bad side and that would be easy at this time of day.

When he could without being too obvious, he watched Ginny stretch and then start their routine. Something was different about her, but it took him the entire 45 minutes of their time for him to figure out. When he did, it was all he could do not to tease her. On the other hand, tonight would be Ginny's night and he could tease her then.

o-o-o

That afternoon when classes had ended, they all came back to their rooms to put their books away before dinner. Ginny came running into their main room from her bedroom shouting, "I got a letter from Dad!"

As she ripped it open, Hermione asked, «Where did you get it?»

«It was on my bed,» the red-head quickly replied as she read the letter.

They all waited patiently until she finished, then Harry asked, «What did he say?»

«He says 'Hi' to everyone and that they are all doing well. He also says their counseling sessions are helping, or he thinks they are. He also says that he's still secretly meeting with Percy once a week and that's going well too.» Ginny looked up at them. «I think he just wanted to make sure letters could get to me and have me write back.»

That made Harry wonder about mail and he only now realized that he had not seen any owls delivering mail at breakfast on either morning.

«I'll be back in a few minutes,» he told them. «I have a question for Gaston.»

«I can guess what it's about and I'd like to know too.» Hermione joined him as he left. Ginny wanted to write to her father now, and Gabrielle wanted to write to Fleur.

Harry and Hermione found their chaperones in their quarters, which looked a lot like a regular house on the inside.

«Ah, Harry and Hermione, what can I do for you?» Gaston greeted them.

«We were curious about the mail. Ginny just found a letter on her bed and we weren't sure how it got there, and we didn't know how to send letters here. My owl should be here, but I haven't seen her.» Harry ended his questions with a shrug to show how puzzled he was about it all.

«Those questions are easily answered,» the man told him. «Follow me and I'll show you the owlery and where your owl should be unless she's out hunting.»

«So we would take our letters to the owlery to send them out?» Hermione asked to be sure.

«Yes. Was it not like that at Hogwarts?» Gaston asked.

«Well, yes, that is how we sent letters, but the mail came to us every morning in the Great Hall and I realized a few minutes ago that no owls came into the Great Hall during breakfast for either morning we've been here,» Harry said.

«Owls in your Great Hall during breakfast? That's...» He stopped whatever else he had been about to say. «I'm sorry, that must seem rude. Different schools can have different ways. It's only,» Gaston stopped talking and looked at them carefully, «wouldn't that cause problems? You know, if a bird were land in a dish of food? Not all owls are perfect flyers.»

Harry laughed and Hermione smiled slightly. «Most never do, but there is the occasional old owl who had trouble and would knock over a glass of pumpkin juice when landing.»

Gaston nodded his understanding, but did not look fully convinced. «Here, the owls are directed to the owlery, where house-elves remove the letters and put them on your bed. It's why some students return to their dorm room during a free period in the morning or lunch

time, to check for mail.» Harry nodded his understanding.

«As you said, different schools can have different ways,» Hermione quoted him.

A few minutes later, Gaston had led them to a room on the top floor of the north wing. In a largish room with open windows, they found many owls, including Hedwig. The snowy owl descended when they walked in.

Gaston smiled at them. «A beautiful owl.»

«This is Hedwig, my first faithful friend,» Harry told him while the owl preened in the praise. He stroked her head softly. «I'm sorry my friend, but no letters now. I wanted to find where you were. However, I think we'll have letters for you tomorrow.» Hedwig gave a short barking hoot to show she understood before she flew back up to her perch.

«An intelligent owl too, I see,» Gaston commented as he led them back to their dorm area.

Hermione used the trip back to find out what the Rousseaus's did during the day. Gaston explained that they were saving money to buy a house, and he was working on a Potions mastery while Anne was working on an Arithmancy mastery.

o-o-o

After dinner, they went to the library to do their homework as they needed to find some books to help them. At nine, Ginny packed up her things and helped Harry with his and they walked back to their rooms arm in arm. Hermione and Gabrielle walked behind them.

Harry could hear the two behind them talk, especially Gabrielle.

«They look so cute together,» the little blonde said. «Do I look like that with Harry?»

«I think so,» Hermione replied.

«I don't think my derrière looks as good as Ginny's does though,» Gabrielle continued.

Harry heard Hermione make a noise almost like a snort before it turned into a clearing of the throat. He had almost snorted at the comment. Looking out the side of his eyes, he saw Ginny become very red.

«You're only about to turn twelve,» Hermione finally said after she got her voice back under control. «Give it a little time.»

«Time, that's all everyone says,» Gabrielle said with exasperation.

«You know that magic can't fix everything,» Hermione reminded her.

«I know,» Gabrielle all but whined, «but I hate waiting.»

«They say good things come to those who wait,» Hermione quoted. «I'd also tell you that many times anticipation can make something even better when it arrives.»

Harry thought that was smart, but he expected that from Hermione.

In his bedroom, Ginny joined him as soon as she could in what looked like only her long sleep shirt.

Harry decided it was time to tease her a little. "I've figured out your little game, Mrs Potter." He stood there and watched surprise and shock flash across her face for a moment, before it disappeared into mischievousness.

She jumped on the bed and seemed to sprawl on it, although Harry thought she looked really good, lying there slightly twisted with one hip in the air and her hair splayed out above her head. "What game would that be, my husband?"

He chuckled as he sat on the edge of the bed and looked at her shapely pale legs that were lightly freckled. The hem of her shirt started at mid-thigh and went up over a nicely curved derrière and a slim waist. Her small breasts showed that she felt cool, which only added to the image she was trying to create, or so he thought. He briefly wondered if she had practiced making this carefree yet sexy look.

"I couldn't figure out why you were so excited about Gabi's bra charm the other day, but I believe I've got the answer now."

Ginny blushed slightly, but did not look away. "And?" she asked, as if daring him.

"You wanted to tease me with it, much like you're doing now."

A playful look danced across her face. "Maybe."

"Two can play at that game," he said teasingly. "For example, it's obvious you're not wearing a bra now, but are you wearing knickers? Just how daring are you?"

"I'm not sure I want to tell you," she replied, continuing the playful game.

Harry recognized the dare and considered it. Her comment about him being too noble came to him, as did the thought that they were magically married. Seeing if she would stop him, he moved his hand to her knee and slowly slid it up the outside of her thigh, which was on top, since her body was twisted with one hip in the air. When his hand came to the hem of her sleep shirt, she tensed slightly, but

otherwise only lifted one eyebrow ... again, as if daring him. Casting his nobility away, he raised her shirt enough to see the top of her legs and that she was wearing red knickers. "So, you do have a limit," he said as he let the shirt go so it could drop back in place, which caused her to breathe a little easier, or so it seemed to him.

"For now. There are some things I'm not ready to do yet," she admitted honestly as she rolled over and turned around to lay her head in his lap. "That will change, but until then, there's a lot of me you can caress as much as you like." Her playfulness had returned.

He moved one hand to her head and lovingly moved her hair out of the way so he could see all of her face. Then he did caress her face and neck.

With a content look she said, "You finally confronted Hermione about her missing conversation on your birthday."

There was no missing the fact that she had made that a statement and not a question. "You've talked to her about it then?"

"You know we talk about you because you've caught us doing it," she pointed out.

He continued to caress her head. "What do you two, or three, talk about?"

She shrugged slightly, "Whatever, but normally only the important stuff, or the trivial stuff."

Harry chuckled. "That sounds like you talk about everything."

"No," she corrected him, "there are a lot of things we keep to ourselves, especially those things that only affect one of us. So what did you two agree to?"

It took a moment, but an important fact jumped out at him. "Ah, she didn't tell you, did she?"

Ginny actually frowned, although it didn't last long as her contented look returned quickly from his ministrations. "No."

Harry's shifted a little so he could use both hands and moved them to her shoulders, which caused her to give a soft moan of pleasure. "Did you know she doesn't like to talk about sex?"

"Yes, or at least as long as she thinks it's directed at her; but you didn't answer my question," she reminded him.

He shifted again and moved back just enough he could lean forward and kiss her thoroughly. When he pulled back, he softly said, "No, I didn't answer your question." With a grin, he grabbed his wand and put out the light. "It's time for sleep if we're getting up at 5:30," he told her with a tease in his voice.

"You would be in so much trouble, Harry Potter, if you weren't so good to me." Ginny laid her head on his shoulder and draped an arm across his chest.

Harry decided the only thing he could say was, "I love you, Ginny," because he could not tell from her tone of voice if her last comment had been teasing or not.

"I love you too, Harry."

On their second Saturday at school, Harry and Ginny were outside with their brooms at the main Quidditch stadium for tryouts for their dorm team. Hermione and Gabrielle were present too, but only to watch.

Since the primary Red team, or "Red-A", did not need any players, with six seventh years and one sixth year, only "Red-B", or the

secondary team, was looking for players. The captain and keeper of the team was a seventh year named Antonio Bruno.

«We need two Chasers,» he told the small crowd of about fifteen hopefuls. «If you are not a Chaser, I'd suggest you play in the weekend pick-up games to catch the captains' attention for next year, or in case there is an injury this year and we need a replacement. Only the Chasers should follow me.» He turned and walked over to where the current team was waiting.

Ginny looked at Harry. He shrugged and walked over with her, as did six others. Harry felt that playing Chaser was better than not playing at all.

Bruno looked at the eight players and then started to put them through their paces with flying drills, passing drills, and scoring run drills. Two of the younger hopefuls were sent away quickly.

Harry was not doing well at the throwing exercises, but did very well on the flying parts. Ginny, however, was doing very well, or so he thought. Her broom, made for Chasers, probably helped.

At the end of the time, the captain called them and the team over. «Thank you all for trying out. The new Chasers will be Weasley and de David. We practice twice a week, Sunday from four to six, and Thursday from four until five-thirty. Yes, that will make you a little late to dinner, but we must practice before it gets dark. The first practice is tomorrow afternoon.»

When he started to walk away, Ginny quickly spoke up. «Wait! You're not going to have tryouts for any other positions?»

Bruno stopped and faced her. «No, there is no need. We have good players.» He saw her looking at Harry. «I'm sorry, your betrothed is a good flyer, but he is not a good Chaser.»

«That's because he's a Seeker,» she responded.

«Ah, we already have a good Seeker.»

«One who has never lost a game?» Ginny put forth, and grabbed Harry's arm when she could tell he was about to speak up. She was sure he was about to tell her to drop this, but she wanted the best Seeker on their team and was sure it was Harry.

«And what would you propose?» Bruno asked with amusement.

«A Seeker duel. Release the Snitch and see who can find it first, two out of three to be fair in case the Snitch takes a bad jump once.» A quick glance at Harry showed him to be more surprised by her boldness than anything.

Bruno looked very thoughtful for a long moment. «Silva!»

A tall but very thin boy with curly brown hair walked over. «Do we really have to do this?»

«She says he's played for four years and never lost a game. That's remarkable.» Bruno looked at his current Seeker.

«I have played for six years and have only lost two Snitches. We would do better if the A team would quit stealing our best Chasers, especially in mid-season,» Silva retorted.

«No one would disagree with you on that.» Bruno considered the matter for a little longer before he walked over to the chest of Quidditch balls. Opening it, he pulled out a Golden Snitch.

«Are you serious?» Silva questioned him.

Bruno turned and hurled the Snitch. «Go, bring me the Snitch and it's the best two out of three.»

Both players already had their brooms in their hands; mounting their brooms quickly, they took off, Harry only a split second faster and not enough to really matter.

It took almost six minutes before Harry saw the Snitch and then both boys were chasing after it. Silva was a good flyer, but it was his longer arms that allowed him to catch the first Snitch. With a smug grin, he gave the magical ball to the captain.

«I guess that shows everyone who's better,» Silva said with pride.

«Almost,» Bruno said as he released it again.

Harry saw it first again this time. During the chase, he lured the older boy a little too close to the wall and Silva grazed it. That maneuver was enough to slow him down such that Harry easily captured the Snitch.

When Harry handed the Snitch to Bruno, Silva looked a little angry now. Harry looked at Ginny and saw her confidence in him, plus she blew him a kiss.

Bruno held on to the Snitch and looked at the two players carefully before he grinned a little evilly. Using his wand, he summoned the Quidditch chest over to him. «I think we need a little more realism. Russo, you will target only Potter, and de Garza, you will target only Silva.» He released the Snitch and the two Bludgers in short order. Go!» All four players rose into the sky.

This time, Harry had not only his fellow Seeker, but one and sometimes two Bludgers - when he got too close to Silva - to worry about also. As he zipped around the pitch, automatically dodging the Bludgers, he noticed that Silva seemed to be having a harder time looking and dodging than he did - a weakness to be exploited if possible.

As if suddenly seeing the Snitch, Harry took off away from Silva so the boy could not immediately see what Harry was chasing - nothing. As expected, Silva reacted and zoomed after Harry.

He weaved a little, but made sure not to go his fastest as Harry wanted Silva to catch up. When the seventh year closed, Harry went into a sharp dive, not worrying about the Bludgers too much. They would have a hard time getting him now, he was flying so erratically. With the ground approaching quickly, he pulled up and curved left. Silva managed to avoid crashing, but it was close and he did scrape the ground, causing him to lose control for several precious seconds, as well as fly in a straight line. That was all it took for de Garza's Bludger to catch up and graze the end of Silva's broom such that he lost control, sending him flying without his broom. Fortunately, Silva was still only a few feet above the ground.

Harry took a sharp left to avoid his own Bludger and saw a flash of gold not far away. Silva, who was groaning on the ground, never had a chance. Harry grabbed the Snitch and landed near Bruno a moment later.

The remaining Chaser from last year was helping Silva up and giving a supporting shoulder as the two walked back over to everyone else.

«Good match,» Harry said, holding out his hand as Silva came over.

«Good match,» Silva said a little grudgingly.

«You are a good Seeker,» Bruno said with respect. «Be here at four tomorrow.» He turned to Silva. «Don't slack off your practice; injuries happen.»

When everyone else started leaving, Ginny threw her arms around Harry's neck and kissed him hard. «I knew you could do it.»

«He was tough.» He hugged her tightly. «Thanks for sticking up for me.»

«I wanted the best Seeker,» she told him with an easy grin.

Harry looked a little disbelievingly at her, but ended the look with his own grin. «Sure, if you say so.»

Gabrielle and Hermione were very happy for both of them.

On the 18th of September, Harry was doing his best to arrange for a party for Hermione since it was her sixteenth birthday. Ginny and Gabrielle had been tasked with a few small things, but mostly keeping Hermione busy so Harry could get things organized.

The Red Dorm celebrated birthdays once a month for all those who had their birthday that month; the exception being for those who had their birthday in July and August were celebrated during the June party. The party for September would not happen until next week, not that it mattered to Harry. He wanted a party only for Hermione. That meant it would have to be in their rooms.

With special permission from the Headmistress, Harry had also written Dobby and had him come for the day to help set things up. Harry hoped that by having the party one day before her real birthday that Hermione would be completely surprised.

As the "Potters" walked into their rooms after dinner, Harry opened the door and Ginny gave Hermione a friendly push so she would enter first. The banner and cake were front and center and there were balloons too. "Surprise! Happy Birthday!" the other three shouted at her.

Hermione immediately turned red, but she also threw her arms around Harry and gave him a kiss. Ginny and Gabrielle only received hugs.

«I can't believe you did this!» She turned around to take it all in. When she came to the kitchenette area, she saw their house-elf. «Dobby! You too!»

The elf acted bashfully, so she went over and knelt down to give him a hug. «I am glad Mistress is happy. I made Mistress's favorite cake. Mistress's mother told me what to make.» She was very touched by the effort Dobby had made.

They cut the cake and started handing out pieces to everyone in the dorm. Harry had opened their door and invited anyone who wanted to stop in and see the main room of their suite. His door and the door to the girl's side were closed and sealed.

Harry had talked to the Rousseaus's to get permission. They had told him that that brothers and sisters also threw small parties occasionally, so while Harry's might be bigger than that, it would not be uncommon.

The party ended a little after eight and while Dobby cleaned up, Harry brought out the presents.

«Dobby also brought our letter box from Sirius.» He sat the small stack of brightly wrapped boxes in front of Hermione and kept the plain one himself. Opening it, he pulled out letters and handed them to each recipient.

Hermione left the presents for the moment and opened her letter from her parents, as the others eagerly read letters from their family back home. Hermione's eyes were shiny when she was done.

«Neville and Luna say hi,» Harry told them as he finished that letter. «They also say that changes in the school are a breath of fresh air and wished we were there.» He looked at the birthday girl. «They also say 'Happy Birthday' to you Hermione.»

«That's nice of them to remember,» she said.

Gabrielle pushed the small pile of presents closer to her oldest bond-sister. Taking the hint, Hermione started opening them. Her parents had sent her some books in French. The Delacours sent her a small magical ball that projected the night sky from anywhere in the world onto the ceiling, making Astronomy easier to study. Sirius sent a small silver dog about that size of her fist. When she touched it, it would slowly move like a real dog and then freeze when she lifted her hand.

Harry gave her a necklace that she thought was far too nice. The last present was a joint gift from Ginny and Gabrielle, which she slammed the top of the box on when she saw it. She was also beet red. Nothing Harry said would convince her to show him the present and other girls would not say either; they would only giggle.

They all said good-bye to Dobby before he started "popping" his way back to the Potter home, needing several jumps.

«I'll be there in a moment, Harry,» Hermione told him.

It was Monday night, and yet another reason Harry had picked this day for her party. Harry came out of his bathroom a few minutes later and found Hermione already there and still fully dressed, which was very unusual.

"Hermione?" He walked slowly to her.

She put her arms around him and kissed him deeply. "I'm ready," was all she said.

He kissed her back gently and put his forehead against hers as he smiled. "I was going to surprise you tonight and suggest that."

With slightly trembling hands, Hermione started unbuttoning Harry's shirt. Harry repeated each action on her and revealed a lacy bra. Hermione took Harry down to only his boxers. He removed her skirt, leaving her in only the lacy blue bra and some matching lacy blue knickers.

She turned around and said, "You can unhook it and take it off." There was a slight catch in her voice, a little nervousness.

Harry was glad to hear that she was not perfectly calm with this, as he was not either - excited, yes, but also nervous. He also could not help but look further down.

"Harry?" She startled him out of his thoughts and, well, fantasies.

"Sorry, just admiring the view back here too."

"Harry!" She blushed bright red on the parts of her neck that he could see.

He reached out and grabbed the bra strap. "I can't help it, I like what I see. You're attractive and pretty." He managed to get the bra strap undone and just looked at her bare back as Hermione dropped her bra. "I like all of you. You've even managed to tame your hair by letting it grow longer."

"You shouldn't stretch the truth so far," she told him, still facing away.

"No, you shouldn't think so little of yourself," he said a little forcefully. He sighed, "I'm sorry, but I don't understand why you put your looks down so much. You are beautiful because I find you that way and it's my opinion that counts."

She turned quickly and pressed herself against him and kissed him soundly and then hugged him for all she was worth. "Thank you, I've been teased for my looks all through my school years. It's hard not to

believe it and to get over it."

It was hard for him to think at the moment with a reasonably well-endowed bare-chested girl pressed against his bare chest for the first time. Finally, he spoke carefully and gently to her. "I can kind of understand as my Uncle and Aunt put me down and said I was worthless, but your parents and you three have cured me of that and I want to cure you of this doubt you have."

"Thank you for believing in me, Harry."

"Now that we have that out of the way, and we've not done any school work tonight, how about we do a little research on bodies?" The teasing in his voice could not be missed.

"Oh, Harry, what would I do without you?"

:"Probably not have nearly as much fun," he joked.

"That's probably true," she replied. Then slowly, she loosened her hold on him and backed up a step.

"Truly beautiful..." he breathed.

They did not go to sleep until an hour after their normal time.

o-o-o

When Ginny came out of her room at 5:30 the next morning, Gabrielle was already waiting.

«Do you think the plan worked?» asked the little blonde excitedly.

Ginny grinned. «Let me get my wand.»

After retrieving her wand, Ginny led Gabrielle towards Harry's room.

At the door, she whispered. «Don't make any noise.» Gabrielle nodded vigorously as Ginny put a silencing charm on the hinges. With great care and deliberate slowness, she turned the knob and opened the door. When it was wide enough to stick their heads in with Gabrielle's under Ginny's, Ginny did a weak light spell. The faint glow of her wand barely showed Harry spooned behind Hermione in his bed - both topless. Ginny silently put the light out and slowly closed the door before hurrying back into the girl's common room.

Gabrielle and Ginny looked at each other and made little squealing sounds of delight and did a happy dance together to celebrate their plan to speed up "the schedule".

o-o-o

Harry closed his half-opened eyes and tried to get a few more minutes of sleep after the quiet click from the door. Living at the Dursleys had trained him to be a light sleeper and the click of the door opening a moment ago had woken him.

At the moment, he was not sure why Ginny and Gabrielle would open his door this early in the morning and stick their heads in simultaneously, but if he could not figure it out when he was more awake later, he knew one of the girls would tell him if he was persistent enough. Gabrielle would be the easiest to make talk, he decided as he grasped Hermione's breast and slipped back into unconsciousness.

(end of chapter 29)

Chapter 30 - Balancing Life

Harry was amused with Gabrielle. She had been very observant of him over the last couple weeks. It was not hard to guess why either. September was ending and her birthday was on the 10th of October; therefore, she was trying to catch him doing something for her birthday. He was not sure why she tried because he had plenty of opportunity to organize during the periods she was in class and he was not.

He was also amused by her because when he had his "alone time" with her the night after Hermione's birthday and asked her about her and Ginny checking on him the next morning, the girl had not tried to hide what the two had been doing, nor was she even the slightest bit bashful or embarrassed. His guess that they had wanted to know if he and Hermione had taken the next step physically in their relationship had been correct. He would also admit he was surprised that she had argued that because he was fifteen now, that it would be entirely appropriate for her and Ginny to go topless around him when they turned fifteen. He supposed he could not really refute their logic, but he looked forward to the conversation about that when Hermione heard, assuming he was there and it was not a "girls only" conversation. He thought it would be highly entertaining to listen to and to watch.

Deciding to put her out of her misery, he tugged slightly on the hand he was holding as they walked back from dinner, causing her to look up at him. «Since your birthday is on a Tuesday, would you prefer to celebrate it on the Friday before, or the Friday after? I thought it would be easier if we didn't have class the next day.»

Her smile brightened, «Before!»

The enthusiasm and expected answer caused him to chuckle. «As you wish. Is there anything special you'd like for your birthday?»

«Yes,» she drawled as her elation from a moment ago disappeared.

Her sudden sadness surprised him. «What?» he asked with concern.

«Lots of kisses, but I know I can't have that until my birthday next year.»

«Ahh, that's so sad,» he told her with fake sympathy even as he moved quickly to pick her up in his arms, one under her knees and the other under her back, and then swung her around, causing her to giggle and his other two girls to chuckle as they walked behind.

Gabrielle now looked her more usual self. «It is sad, but I've waited this long, I can wait until next year - barely.»

Harry kissed her on the forehead before dropping her feet back to the ground. «Maybe I can find something else special for my little Veela,» he said with a grin, gaining a hopeful look from her.

After dinner on the 7th of Oct, Gabrielle was practically dragging Harry back to their rooms. Gabrielle's best friend, Jolien was having to walk very quickly to keep up with her. Hermione and Ginny again followed, letting Gabrielle have her special day.

Harry had once again received permission from the Headmistress to let Dobby come help decorate and cater, as well as open the party up to the rest of their dorm. Again, there were balloons, cake, and punch. Everyone wished Gabrielle, «Happy Birthday».

While Gabrielle was talking to a few of her second year friends, Harry walked over to Hermione and Ginny. «It's hard to believe how old she looks now compared to what she looked like when I first met her less than a year ago.»

«I know,» Hermione agreed. «It's like she aged almost three years in less than one year. I can't tell the difference between her and her

class mates.»

«I think I'm a little jealous,» Ginny added, causing the other two to look at her. «At this rate, she'll get her adult breasts before I will.»

Harry chuckled and put an arm around the red-head's shoulder for a reassuring squeeze. «Don't worry,» he quietly told her, «I'm sure you'll have nice breasts. I already like what I see.»

While Ginny blushed bright red, Harry moved the half-step needed to put an arm around Hermione. «Don't you worry about your breasts either, that's my job.» Hermione gave him an embarrassed smile, but did not change color, having mostly grown accustomed to quiet comments like that from Harry over the last few weeks since her birthday with their increased intimacy.

After the party and when it was just the four of them, they gave Gabrielle her gifts and then Harry took her to his bedroom for their hour together before Ginny joined them for sleeping.

"Did you have a good time?" he asked Gabi, switching to English during this time as was their habit now.

"I did. Thank you for the necklace. It is my favorite now." She kissed him on the cheek near his lips.

He felt her glow of happiness, not only in her happy expression, but in her fully releasing her Veela allure and being herself fully without restraint. "Would you like a little something special for your birthday?"

She nodded and looked at him with wide eyes, hopeful.

It was almost certain that he was going to disappoint her at least a little, but he hoped this worked out. He liked making her happy, but he still had a line he had no intention of crossing. "Close your eyes and relax," he told her.

She instantly obeyed, trusting him completely.

Harry felt privileged, or that was the only word he could come up with, to have such complete trust from her. He vowed to himself to do his best to always be equal to that as he leaned down and started slowly kissing her face and neck. She seemed to purr in contentment as he placed light kisses on her to show endearment and affection. After a few minutes, he ended the gesture with a light chaste kiss on her lips and then pulled her to him to hold her close.

«So close, so nice...» she murmured sleepily and completely at peace with the world.

He continued to sit against the headboard of his bed and hold her, stroking her head and hair ever so gently.

When Ginny joined them later, she smiled the sight of the two and whispered, "A good birthday then?"

Harry smiled and nodded. "Help me put her to bed." With Ginny's help, he managed to get Gabrielle under the covers without her waking fully where she promptly snuggled into his side with an arm over him, holding him tightly.

Harry felt good as he soared on his broom the first Saturday in November. It was time for his first Quidditch game of the year. The practices had knocked the rust off of him, or that's how he thought of it. He had been happy to win the spot of Seeker on the team, but hours after the tryout when he had analyzed his flying, he realized that he had not really been up to his usual standard. If he had, the other boy would not have grabbed that one Snitch from him.

He had spent the time since the tryouts getting back into shape, as well as showing Gabrielle the basics of playing Seeker. If she tried hard, he thought she might make a good one when he left.

Since they had so many Quidditch teams, two per dorm, the schedule was created to allow the inter-house game to be played in November as a demonstration game, one each Saturday. They had December and January off for adjustments and more practice (and to avoid the coldest part of the winter), then because the weather was not as cold here as in Scotland, the real games started in February, with all the "B" teams playing each other round-robin, and the "A" teams playing each other, one a weekend or all of the matches over twelve weeks. In May, at the end of the regular season, the top two "A" teams and top two "B" teams had a playoff to determine the school champion.

Taking position, he looked at the boy who held the Seeker position for the primary Red team, or Red-A. Louis Blac was a seventh year who had a good record, or so Harry had been told.

The whistle blew, pulling him from his contemplation of the differences between Quidditch at Beauxbatons and at Hogwarts. Looking down from his position, he saw the balls released, including the Golden Snitch just before it disappeared for the first minute, just like it was spelled to do.

One of the Chasers from the Red-A team grabbed the Quaffle first, forcing his Red-B team to go on the defensive. His team's Chasers gave a good try at defense, slowing down the attackers, but eventually a throw on goal was made. Fortunately, Bruno stopped it before throwing it to Ginny, who led her team's Chasers down the pitch.

Harry pulled his attention from Ginny and the Quaffle and started scanning for the Golden Snitch. The Red-A Beaters were focusing on the Chasers at the moment, so he could mostly ignore them. The other Seeker, Blac, was flying his own pattern although Harry noticed that the other boy was never too far away from him. It was a good compromise strategy.

Half an hour into the game, Harry had only seen the Snitch once. The winged ball had quickly hidden itself again among a crowd of players. He was not sure if Blac had seen it or not, the appearance had been so brief. He was searching diligently though because the two teams were well matched with Red-B down by only twenty points, so the winner would probably be decided by the Seekers.

As he slowly dodged a Bludger that was hit only in his general area to make sure he did not get complacent, he saw a flicker of gold near his team's goals. A quick glance showed Blac was about an equal distance away but looking the other way.

Harry dove to gain speed, which drew Blac's attention, causing the boy to turn and start flying towards Harry. With a grin, he pulled up and flew low to the ground under the Red-B Beaters for protection and toward the prize.

Blac cut the corner by going over the beathers to make up space and pulled in right behind Harry.

Harry reached out to grab the Snitch, but it suddenly zoomed left and down, causing Harry to zip past it.

Blac over shot it as well and pulled left for a sharp U-turn.

Although he had never done the maneuver before, Harry braked as hard as he could as he swerved right, almost directly at the leftmost goal post about half way up. With his left hand firmly gripping his broom, Harry stuck out his right hand to grab the goal post - praying he had slowed enough and was not about to pull his arm out of its socket or throw himself off of his broom.

His hand smacked into the post, stinging greatly, but he held on just long enough for the maneuver to whip him around the post and generally back the way he needed to go at a speed Blac could not

hope to match as he did his larger U-turn. Ignoring the fire that he was starting to feel in his shoulder, Harry raced after the Snitch which was trying to head up. Seconds later, Harry's left hand closed over the little winged ball and he flew to the ground as quickly as he could because he had lost control of his right arm. He was finding it difficult to maintain control of the broom with the Snitch in his good hand and the pain in his shoulder.

He had barely landed in a stumble when another player seemed to drop out of the air, obviously jumping off her broom from just above him, grabbing his good shoulder to help steady him before he fell over.

Ginny held out a hand to stop others and screamed, «He's injured! We need a healer!»

With tears in his eyes, he gasped, "My shoulder..." before he sank to his knees.

The school was large enough to have a fully certified Healer and he was already running over, along with the nurse assistant. The team opened a path for the medical personnel to run through.

«Where do you hurt?» the healer asked as he started to do a diagnostic on Harry.

«He said it was his shoulder,» Ginny told the man helpfully while pointing to the one with the limp arm.

«Yes that seems to be the only injury and he seems to have dislocated it. A brilliant yet foolish flying maneuver.» The man looked at his assistant. «Hold his other shoulder and back, and» he looked at Ginny, «you'll need to move aside.»

Ginny stepped back but watched closely. She could feel that Harry was in pain and wanted it to end, but she was also fearful as to what

they were about to do.

As the nurse held his left shoulder and back steady, the healer cast a spell at Harry's right shoulder and flicked his wand at the end.

Harry cried out briefly before going silent with a look of great relief on his face. «Thank you,» he whispered hoarsely.

«My pleasure, young man. Take this,» he held out a phial which Harry quickly downed. «That should help to reduce the swelling. Please be very gentle with that shoulder for the next few days. Also, come by and see one of us this evening after dinner so we can recheck it.»

Harry nodded and thanked them both again while Ginny grabbed his good arm again and helped him to stand, just as Hermione and Gabrielle arrived after their fast trek from the stands.

Gabrielle threw her arms around his waist and buried her face in his chest.

Harry was not sure if she was trying to comfort him or verify for herself that he really was all right.

Hermione had been a step behind the little Veela, her expression alternating between several emotions: fear, concern, and exasperation. The concern finally won.

«Are you really all right?» She asked as she wrung her hands lightly.

He lifted his injured arm a little to beckon her over, and she stepped forward quickly into a hug. Ginny moved too so all four were a tight little knot. «I'll be fine. Some rest and dinner later will help a lot.»

«And you won't be doing that again, right?» Hermione asked, her exasperation leaking out.

Harry chuckled. «Probably not.»

«Probably?» she asked with a raised eyebrow.

«Not for anything less than the championship, Harry» Ginny told him as she stepped back and then bent down to pick up his and her brooms.

Hermione's expression showed clearly that she did not like that answer, but she kept quiet.

When his bond-mates released him, Harry saw Louis Blac stepped forward with his hand out. Harry lightly shook hands with the boy, who was very gentle as well. «Good game, Potter. I'm not sure I could have done that move ... or would have wanted the injury that came with it,» both boys grinned at that thought, «but you deserved that win.»

«Thanks, you played well too.»

Blac nodded and walked away. The rest of Red-B, led by Bruno, now crowded around him and congratulated him on the spectacular catch. The Red-A team also congratulated him before everyone headed back into the school.

After dinner that evening, there was a simple party in the Red Dorm common room; punch and snacks had been provided.

People were still talking about his catch this afternoon, which amused and slightly embarrassed Harry. He also found it amusing and actually warming that Ginny had appointed herself his watcher for the evening and took care of him, not that Hermione or Gabrielle were ever far away. There was something about having them near that he liked - a feeling of family he decided finally.

Antonio Bruno finally wandered over with a very pleased look on his face, causing Harry to think that perhaps the seventh year had added some wine or other alcohol to his punch.

«That's the best catch I've ever seen in my time here. Great dedication that was,» the captain of Harry's team said.

«Err, thanks.»

«And a great decision to hold tryouts for Seeker.» Bruno gave a small nod to Ginny for her part before he studied Harry for a moment more. «Potter, please promise me that you won't transfer to the A-team if they ask you.»

«Why would they?» Harry was genuinely curious. «Blac is good.»

«He is, but you're better,» said Bruno a little quieter and with intensity.

Harry looked at Ginny, who shrugged slightly. Turning to Bruno, he said, «I don't see any reason for us to change teams. I think we have a good one.»

Bruno's grin lit up. «That's good to hear, very good. And the Healer's report?»

«When I check back in with him he said it's fine and will be as good as new in a couple of days.»

«Very good, very good indeed.» The taller boy looked at Ginny again. «Take good care of our Seeker.»

She flashed him a smile. «I plan to.»

Bruno chuckled and walked away.

Ginny did take good care of him for the rest of the evening and when the two of them went to bed that night.

Harry looked around as he ate breakfast and sighed.

«What's wrong?» asked Philip, the boy who had become his best male friend at this school and was much like Neville was at Hogwarts.

«I like all this,» Harry said as he waved his hand around, indicating the room and the school, «and I'm glad I'm here, but I still miss Hogwarts at times.»

«I do too - at times,» Hermione added from his other side. «Do you suppose it's because we're about to go home for Christmas?»

«Maybe,» Harry replied with a half-hearted shrug.

«What do you miss most?» Philip asked.

«The ceiling.»

«Huh?» Philip looked at him as if he were crazy.

Hermione agreed. «The ceiling in the Great Hall at Hogwarts is charmed to show the sky at it presently is. It makes the room feel much larger than it is, shows the weather outside, and it's some amazing magic.»

«It is brilliant work,» Harry agreed.

«That would be interesting to see,» Philip told them sincerely.

«I like the fountain out front here, but Hogwarts has a lake that's great to walk around when it's not too cold,» Harry listed another reason.

Hermione gave a fake shiver. «I don't miss the cold in the winter. The castle seemed frozen to me for almost three months of the year. It's not too bad outside here today.»

«True,» Harry said with an easy grin. «It's a lot easier to practice Quidditch when the weather only gets cool.»

«It will snow here a few times during the winter,» Philip told him, «but it's usually only for a few days at a time.»

«I wonder how much snow will be on the ground when we go back home?» Harry looked at Hermione who could only shrug. They did not get weather reports about Britain at Beauxbatons, and the French newspaper Hermione subscribed to for them did not mention Britain unless it was major news.

Headmistress Maxime tapped her fork on her glass as she stood. Everyone turned to give her their attention quickly as she did not make many announcements.

«Thank you for your prompt attention. I would like to give everyone an assignment to complete during your Christmas holidays.» She gave a slight knowing smile as she heard the groans. «Dorm aides, please make sure that everyone that is assigned to you knows about this before they leave this evening.

«As I'm sure you've noticed, Beauxbatons is starting to get a little crowded in the dorms. We could make them physically bigger with space expansion runes and charms, but the real problem is the number of students in each dorm. The chaperones and dorm aides can only oversee so many people and maintain the level of oversight that I feel is acceptable.

«There are several possible solutions to this. Building a fifth dorm is the most obvious. However, it is also possible to build up one of the

smaller school here in Europe to be a major school like Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, and Hogwarts. Or an entirely new school in another country could even be built. These last two ideas would of course require agreement and cooperation with the ICW as other countries would most likely be involved. I'm sure there are other ways to solve our over-crowding problem too.

«Your assignment, which I want everyone to do, is to think about this problem and make a suggestion as to what we could do. You're also to explore your idea by listing positives and negatives to the idea, and possible solutions to any problems.

«While some feel that the Board of Governors for the school is dealing with this adequately, I feel that the more minds we have thinking about this the more likely we are not to miss any good ideas. So, please sign your name to your essay on this and give it to your chaperone when you return. To make it a little more interesting, if we use any of your ideas that have not already been suggested to the Board of Governors, I'll find a reward for you.»

Many of the students perked up at her last comment.

«I'm not sure what it would be at the moment, but things like 100 Galleons or a copy of a rare book from our library are possibilities.»

Happy murmurs rose.

«A final comment for those who are concerned about losing friends... Whatever solution we pick will probably take a year or two at the soonest to implement, and those already enrolled at Beauxbatons will have the choice to continue their education as originally planned.

«Please remember that this is mandatory for everyone, and have a Happy Christmas if I do not see you later today.»

With her speech done, people started to rise to leave for their first

class.

Harry looked at Hermione and saw a gleam in her eye. He wondered what ideas she had for this or if she was just fantasizing about obtaining a copy of a rare book.

After the last class of the day, Harry and his bond-mates hurried to their rooms to grab a bag. They had all packed the night before in anticipation of going home for the holidays. They were to have a full four weeks off: two in December and two in January.

As they walked to the main entry hall with all the Floo connections with Gabrielle enthusiastically leading them, Harry looked at Hermione. "So you still aren't sure if they'll agree or not?" he asked quietly and purposefully using English, although no one else was close enough that they should have been able to overhear.

Hermione sighed and looked displeased before she replied just as quietly. "I don't like it, but no, I don't know what Mum and Dad will say. I think your idea to invite them with us is the best variation though."

"And if they don't want to let us stay at our house for at least a week?" he queried a little aggressively.

She frowned at him. "I don't think this is the time to push it, Harry. Trying to make it happen this summer will be hard enough."

It was Harry's turn to sigh. "I didn't think I'd miss sleeping with you three until I really thought about what this holiday would be like under our parents' rules."

"I know what you mean, but consider the long term. Even if they say no, we've started them thinking about it for this summer, so they should have more time to get comfortable with the idea."

"The reverse is also true," he told her. "They'll have more time to

come up with reasons we shouldn't do it too."

Hermione shrugged, not having any other idea for the problem.

They came to the main entrance hall and the Flooes. After checking out with their chaperones, they used a little Floo Powder and went to the Delacours. Both Apolline and Jean-Aimé were waiting for them, eager to see them all, giving warm hugs to each of the students.

There was one other person waiting for them and that was whom Gabrielle rushed to. In a small bassinet was her new little brother. Gabrielle stared at the dark-haired little boy in rapture.

«As I told you in my letter, his name is David.» Apolline reached in and gently lifted him out. After making sure he was all right, she carefully handed him to Gabrielle, making small corrections in the sister's arm placement to support the baby's head better. The other bond-mates gathered around and looked intently.

«He's so small,» Hermione murmured in wonder.

«But very cute,» Ginny commented as she rubbed the back of one finger against the baby's cheek ever so gently. «And soft too. He almost makes me wish I was old enough to have one.»

Harry noticed the gleam in all three girls' eyes and smiled in pleasure. He would have his own family with children one day. He also noticed Hermione suddenly scrutinizing Apolline. «What?» he asked his oldest bond-mate.

Hermione continued to look at Apolline. «You really only had this baby a week ago? You're so ... thin again.»

Apolline chuckled and pressed her hand to her stomach to flatten her robes. «I still have a little extra weight as you can see now.»

«But most women-» Hermione stopped abruptly. «I'm so sorry, I wasn't thinking; that was very rude of me.»

Apolline chuckled again and this time placed a hand caringly on the girl's shoulder. «I'm not offended at your surprise. Most women do have extra weight after giving birth to children. I have less extra weight because the baby was small and I'm a Veela. In another few weeks, you won't be able to tell I have recently given birth except for my enlarged breasts which are heavy with milk.»

Harry took a renewed interest in little David again so as to hide his embarrassment. He had noticed his mother-in-law's "improved" figure as her robes did not hide as much on the top.

«I'd have you tell us all about your school this term right now, but I know Fleur would make you start over when she arrives,» Apolline told them. «So, why don't you take your things up to your rooms and unpack, hmm? Fleur should be here soon and we can talk over dinner.»

The four picked up their bags from where they had dropped them and looked around as they made their way to their rooms. The house was decorated for Christmas, including a live tree in a festive bucket with live fairies on the tree.

«I really like this,» Hermione said with some awe as she looked around slowly and wide-eyed.

«Me too,» Ginny added. Harry could only nod at the coloured balls, lights, wreaths, and other Christmas knick-knacks. It was all so very homey. He wanted to do this too at his home one day.

By the time the four returned, Fleur had come home and immediately started giving hugs. As she hugged Gabrielle, she turned to her mother. «I didn't grow this fast when I was her age, did I?»

Apolline chuckled at the question. «You did and it amazed your father too.»

«I'm still amazed - at both of you,» Jean-Aimé said good-naturedly.

«Come, let's eat dinner,» Apolline directed them all to the dining room, «and you can tell us all about your term and what you think of Beauxbatons.» She carried David in one arm with her and ate with one hand, although Jean-Aimé had to help her by dishing the food to his wife's plate.

The four took turns describing their school year so far. Everyone was happy that Gabrielle had found a few good friends her age, especially Fleur as she had had a difficult time making friends because of being a Veela. Gabrielle was quick to point out that being bonded helped a lot, or so she thought.

Ginny enjoyed telling about their Quidditch match, which forced Harry to show that his shoulder was fully healed. Although Apolline gave him a concerned look, Harry could tell his mother-in-law was pleased that he had played well and won. There was no doubt about Jean-Aimé's thoughts as he beamed grandly and told Harry how proud he was of the boy.

When dinner ended and they moved into the family room, Apolline handed the baby to Hermione to hold, since she had been observing the baby so much. Fleur grabbed Ginny's arm and pulled her to a couch by themselves.

«Ginny, tell me all about your brother Bill,» asked Fleur excitedly.

«Bill? Why do you want to know about him?»

The question caused everyone else to look over at the two.

«I met him during my trip to London a few weeks ago and he asked

me on a date. It went well but he asked me to come home with him and meet his family on Boxing Day.»

«To his home? Already?» her father asked loudly in surprise.

«Papa, he told me it wasn't serious, but he wanted to spend some time with me and his family, and because he travels frequently also, the only way he could do that was for me to meet him at his home.» Fleur looked at her father with a little disappointment causing him to back down after a moment, but he looked at Ginny for confirmation.

Ginny thought about what she had been told and her brother. «It's probably true. Bill has brought friends home in the past. I can't remember it ever being a girl before, but I do remember him telling me in a letter about a month ago that he's been very busy at work and traveling a lot.»

Jean-Aimé gave the red-head a nod of acceptance and thanks.

Fleur turned back to Ginny. «We've mostly talked about work and what we do there, so what else can you tell me?»

«Well,» Ginny drawled as she tried to think of what she could say. «Bill was Head Boy at Hogwarts, so he's smart. He's told me he likes his job most of the time, although he finds speaking Gobblygook hard on his throat.»

Fleur laughed. «Yes, I would have to agree.»

«You can trust him. If he promises you he'll do something, he'll do it. He promised me he'd protect me from my other brothers when I was younger and he did a good job of it when he wasn't at school.» Ginny paused, not sure what else to say.

«He is powerful, yes?» Fleur asked with much interest.

«Yes, he might even be the most powerful in magic of all my brothers.» Ginny shrugged. «I'm not sure what else to really tell you. I'm sure I'm biased, but Bill's a good guy and someone you can trust.»

«Wouldn't you say that about all of your brothers?» Apolline asked teasingly.

Ginny smiled but she looked fairly serious. «No, or at least not in the same way. I love them all, but they're also very different. It's probably not fair to any of them, so I don't ever say it in front of them, but Bill's probably my favorite brother.» A grin crept over her. «Although, I've started to appreciate Fred and George more and more as I've grown up,» she finished with a mischievous look.

Harry chuckled and Gabrielle giggled at Ginny's last comment. Hermione alternated between chuckling and a mildly disapproving expression for a moment. Harry was not sure if Hermione disapproved of the twins or of the thought of her agreeing with Ginny about liking their antics.

«How does he react to you?» her mother asked as the levity subsided.

Fleur brightened. «He behaves very well! When I asked him, he admitted that he had to use Occlumency to help avoid distraction. While not perfect,» she sent a quick glance at Harry, «it is workable and he may get better with more time.»

Her mother nodded in satisfaction.

«How about his other behavior?» her father asked. Realizing after the fact what that might sound like, he looked at Ginny and said, «I mean no offense to your family, but I am her father.»

«None taken,» the red-head said graciously.

«He has been very polite, Papa,» Fleur said with a hint of rebuke before her expression changed into a wicked grin. «But I don't think he ever had a choice. As soon as I told him my name, he asked, 'Are you any relation to Gabrielle Delacour?' When I told him she was my sister, and that I did know Ginny, he immediately became nervous and more formal. It was very funny.»

Everyone laughed at Bill's predicament.

«See, my dear husband,» Apolline said smugly, «Gabrielle's bonding has other positive benefits.»

Everyone chuckled or giggled at Jean-Aimé's position now. He graciously nodded agreement to his wife argument.

Ginny walked over to Hermione and held out her hands with a pleading look. Hermione carefully handed the baby over. Ginny moved to sit on the couch next to Gabrielle where the two looked at the baby and played with his tiny hands as the baby continued to sleep peacefully.

After more time discussing Beauxbatons, Fleur's job, and what had been happening at home, everyone retired to their bedrooms.

Shortly after the lights went out, the three bond-mates snuck into Harry's room and crawled into bed with him. A few minutes after they had made themselves comfortable, a weight settled on the end of the bed, startling the four.

«Do you do this at school too?» a soft and motherly voice asked.

«Mother! You scared us!» Gabrielle hissed quietly but forcefully to make her point.

«You have nothing to be scared of if you're doing nothing wrong,»

Apolline said matter-of-factly, «but you didn't answer my question.»

«We're all dressed in pyjamas, as according to the rules,» Hermione said with a hint of defiance.

Apolline sat silently and waited.

After several very long seconds, Harry finally answered her. «Yes, we do this at school when we want to.»

«Thank you for answering me, Harry. I am surprised you do not mind your dorm mates seeing your girls in their pyjamas.»

«We, uhh, we have our own room since we're considered to be married.» He hurried on once he realized how that could be taken. «It's really a suite of rooms and we each have our own bedroom so no one else can see us do this.»

«I see,» she said after a moment. «And do you also sleep alone with Gabrielle?»

«No, definitely not,» Harry assured her quickly. «She'll have to be at least thirteen or probably fourteen.»

«Thirteen,» Gabrielle interjected.

«We'll see,» Hermione said. Everyone could hear Gabrielle give a pouty grump in the dark to that answer.

«I'm not fully happy with this, but that will do for this year. I will think on this further and we will talk about it this summer. Will you promise me these rules will stay in place for the rest of this school year?» Apolline's tone made it very clear there was only one acceptable answer and she received a meek "Oui" from each of the four.

«I wished that I could fully understand,» she said a little wistfully,

«then again, I'm not sure that I would want to be in your situation either. Be very careful, all of you. It is easy to hurt those who love and who trust you.» Apolline stood and left the room.

«At least she accepts this,» Ginny said.

«Mother does because she's a Veela and Veela understand emotion better, or that's what she told me once.» Gabrielle explained. «She didn't say it, but don't tell Father.»

«Isn't he going to know?» Hermione asked incredulously. «She'll tell him, won't she?»

«No, she probably won't tell him and so he won't know if we don't mention it.» Gabrielle's implied "so don't say anything" was clearly received.

On the morning of the twenty-fourth, Sirius Black arrived via the Granger's Portkey.

"The taxi to England has arrived!" he called out.

The bond-mates all hurried to meet him with a hug, their bags already waiting in the hallway. The adult Delacours walked at a more leisurely pace.

"There's not much, but we have a little snow on the ground that should stay to give us a pleasant Christmas look at home," he told them. "Jean-Aimé, Apolline," he greeted the adults. "Ah, and this is the newest one. David, right?"

Apolline proudly showed off her son. "Yes, David. I think he'll look a lot like his father one day."

Jean-Aimé was looking even more proud than his wife. "You'll be back on the tenth?"

"Yes," Harry told him as he walked over to give each of his in-laws a hug before picking up his bag, causing the girls to follow his example.

"I believe the Portkey has had time to recharge," Sirius said, holding it out when the four looked ready to travel. "I'll see you again in a couple weeks." He waved to the Delacours and said the activation phrase to send them back to the Granger's living room.

Dan and Emma greeted them with hugs when they arrived.

Emma also looked closely at each girl with a motherly eye. "My, you're all growing up so fast. You must tell us about school." She looked over to their guest. "Sirius, please stay and have some tea. I'm sure you'll want to hear this too."

"Thank you, I do. However, may I make a request before we get started?" Receiving a nod, he looked at his godson. "Harry, I mentioned in my last letter that you and I need to talk about a few things concerning your property. I'd like to take a couple of hours and do that this afternoon if you don't mind. I think the sooner we do it the better as then I won't forget," he said with an easy grin.

"Sure, after lunch?" Harry asked, looking between Sirius and his parents.

"That would be fine," they said.

"What is this about?" Hermione asked curiously and politely.

Sirius ran a hand through the side of his hair as he thought for a moment. "I think I need to say nothing at this time." When he saw Hermione about to protest, he held up a hand to stop her. "It's not that I'm trying to hide anything, Harry can tell you everything afterward. It's just that if I even try to explain a little, then I'll have to explain it all and I'd rather have Harry's opinion first and then let him

explain it to you later. Besides, I really need to be at the Potter Manor house so we can look at things while we talk."

Hermione did not look fully satisfied, but she nodded acknowledgement. Harry was sure that meant he would be explaining it at his earliest opportunity.

They spent the next couple of hours and through lunch, which Emma had prepared ahead of time, talking about school.

Harry let Hermione do most of the talking as he thought about what he was going to say - or really two things he felt he needed to say. Changing how he viewed his new parents, and how they viewed him, was part of his plan. Unfortunately, every bit of it made him nervous.

As lunch came to an end, Harry finally jumped in after Hermione finished explaining about their holiday assignment. He sat up as tall as he could as he said, "Err, Dan, Emma?"

Everyone looked at him, Dan, Emma, and Hermione being the most surprised by him calling them by their names.

"I, uh, I'd like to spend at least some, if not most of our time, over the holidays, at ... Potter Manor, and I'd like to invite both of you to come with us so that we can spend more time together, and uh, so you can enjoy it with us." He had done it, he thought, but the nervousness was still with him and even increased slightly as he watched his adopted parents look at each other with surprise and questioning looks, obviously gauging what the other might be considering based on expression.

Dan cleared his throat lightly as he wiped his mouth with a napkin and placed it down. He also glanced at Sirius and saw that the man looked as surprised as he felt. "I suppose it's possible, Harry, but could you tell us why you want to do this?"

Harry glanced at Hermione and saw a supportive smile. "We, uh, we thought it would be nice to be somewhere different, sort of like a short trip. We'd also like to get used to the place a little more. We've only spent a little time there over several short visits." He brightened a little as he remembered another argument. "Oh, and I'd be happy to bring you back here in the mornings and get you in the evenings so you could still work when you have to."

"Also, we've made arrangements to meet with some of our Hogwarts friends, and it would be a lot easier for us to visit with them if we were in a Wizarding home with access to the Floo Network," Hermione smoothly added.

Harry nodded his agreement. Looking at Ginny and Gabrielle, he noticed they were doing their best to look neutral and remain out of the discussion, letting the two who looked to the Grangers as parents handle it.

"I see," Dan said after a moment, looking like he was still trying to comprehend the situation. "Sirius? What are your thoughts?"

"I can see the point of being near the Floo Network and it should be safe enough," he said with a nodding motion as he thought it through. "Who will be visiting?"

"Neville and Luna, maybe a couple of times," Harry answered.

"And we're supposed to spend Boxing Day at the Weasleys, so we'd use the Floo Network to travel there too," Hermione said.

"Fleur might visit us after she leaves the Weasleys so she'd need a bedroom," Gabrielle suddenly said, then looked down shyly when everyone looked at her.

The three adults looked at Ginny since she had remained quiet and she knew what they were silently asking.

"My father strongly requested that we come over for the day and we agreed. He's asked all of the boys too and he said in his last letter that they will all be there," Ginny offered in collaboration.

"Except for emergencies, we do have off until the 3rd of January," Emma said non-committally.

"I suppose we could stay there until we have to go back to work and then all of us return to here until you're to return to France for the last week of your holiday." Dan looked at Harry as if trying to divine the young man's thoughts. He was trying to make everyone happy, but was not completely sure of all the dynamics. There was little doubt in his mind that there was more going on than what was being said. Harry's use of their names instead of "Mum and Dad" was an obvious indicator.

"How do you feel about that?" Dan watched all four of the bond-mates to see their reactions. He saw Harry look at each of the girls briefly and receive a small nod, showing him that this was a group issue in some form.

"I think that will work," Harry replied evenly.

The way it was worded caused Dan to think that while Harry accepted the plan, it was not what he wanted. The fact that Harry did accept the plan made Dan wonder even more what was going on.

"In that case, why don't I take Harry over to Potter Manor and he and I can have our talk while the rest of you pack or prepare the house for everyone to be gone for the next week?" Sirius suggested.

That was agreed upon and Harry left his Portkey to the family house with Hermione and let Sirius Side-Along Apparate him to the Potter home.

Harry noticed Sirius looking at him thoughtfully, but the man did not ask any questions about what had just happened either. Instead, they both buttoned the top button of their coats to keep a little warmer in the winter wind.

"This way," Sirius said as they walked around the north side of house. "Have you looked out here much?" he asked the young man.

"Not really. I know there's a lot of land and no Quidditch pitch."

Sirius's bark of laughter echoed against the house and was the only loud sound around. "It will be easier to explore here when you return home for the summer, but I thought there was something we should discuss now."

"What?"

"You may not realize it yet, but you have a big problem. Also, a mutual friend of ours has a problem. To your good fortune, it's possible to help our friend and let him help you as well."

Harry thought he understood the basic idea, but there was not enough detail. "Sirius, you're not making a lot of sense. What's my problem and who do we know that has a problem where we can help each other?"

Sirius snorted, his breath visible in the cold. "Harry, you have a lot of land here. Despite it being protected by various charms and wards, the Muggles know it exists. To them you have a big farm house with the appropriate extra buildings; there appears to be nothing magical here. Still, there are expectations with large farms and ranches.

"You have plenty of money to pay the taxes, but the problem is that people expect to see things done with land, unless maybe it was completely covered with a forest, which you don't have. Harry, they expect the land to be worked and if not, questions eventually get

asked which you probably don't want to answer, and you don't want them trying to find you and not be able to, as that raises more questions." At Harry's puzzled look, Sirius said, "Harry, this land is not normal because it's not worked and that sticks out. It needs to be treated like all the other land around you so you'll fit in and can avoid embarrassing questions."

"Oh," Harry said a little more loudly than he had meant to. "But why hasn't that been a problem in the past, you know, since my parents died?"

"From discreetly asking around, it seems that when your parents went into hiding, they told the story that they were going away on a long trip for a few years. No one seemed to think anything of it when that stretched to a few more than that. But now, it's been fourteen years and people are starting to ask questions about 'the Potter place', as they call it."

"How did you find this out?" He looked up at Sirius since the man had stopped near a few out-buildings.

Sirius grinned at him. "There is a small village near here and I went snooping around there very carefully asking about maybe buying this land as a way to gather information. A few coins at a pub to buy beer can be an easy way to hear stories."

"All right, so you're saying I need to start treating the land like it should be. I guess that's my problem?"

"Yes," Sirius agreed.

"How does that work with the rest of what you told me, about a mutual friend ... who you haven't mentioned yet," Harry reminded him.

"Let's look at this one," Sirius said, indicating the small cottage in

front of him as he went to the door and opened it.

Inside, it was as cold as outside since there was no fire, but it looked like it could be nice little place if someone removed all the dust and otherwise cleaned it.

"Sirius, could you just come out and say whatever you need to say instead of beating around the bush?" Harry told him, with some complaint in his voice.

The man pulled out his wand and cleaned a couch, then shot a fire spell at the fireplace to light what little wood remained before he dropped to the couch. Harry pulled out his wand and cleaned a chair off, one that was near the small fire.

"Harry, Remus Lupin has a problem and I'd consider it a favor if you'd help him and let him help you at the same time," he said slowly.

"At least we're finally getting somewhere," Harry said quietly, although Sirius must have heard because he started looking more nervous. "What is his problem and how does it relate to my problem?"

Sirius sighed heavily. "Remus is a proud person, very proud. I think it comes from having to stand on his own for so long with no one to stand with him. I've been trying to do that since I got out of Azkaban, but he'll only let me go so far, and not very far at that. Harry, he's practically starving since he can't find work right now and he won't let me give him any money."

Harry was shocked to hear that about the family friend. "But why can't he find work now?"

"I don't know, I can't get a lot out of him, but I think it's because the Ministry has been tightening some of their Anti-Werewolf laws, making it harder on all of them. He's been trying to find work in the

Muggle world, but since he has no documented education from there, he can only get the most menial jobs and he's lost the flat he used to rent, so he just stays where he can, warming it with magic as best he can," Sirius said sadly. "I've tried to get him to come stay with me, I've got the room, but for some reason he won't do it."

Harry was starting to understand and draw the connections that Sirius had been alluding to. "What makes you think he'd stay here if I offered it to him?"

Sirius opened his mouth, then stopped and let it snap shut before he started to grin. "You've figured out part of my plan at least. Harry, you need someone to run this place, especially while you're not here. What I've been trying to ask is if you'll hire Remus to work for you. If you made it a job, something he'd have to earn, I think he'd go for it. Tell him you'd trust this to very few people and that he's one of those, you know, something heart-wrenching that he has to say yes to."

"I see," Harry said, nodding as he thought it through. "I want to help him, but do you think he could do the job? If he can't, wouldn't that make things worse?"

Sirius chuckled and grinned. "Ah, Harry. You don't know Remus Lupin, very well if you ask that. Not only is he prideful about doing things on his own, he's very prideful to learn quickly whatever he needs to survive. I think he knows enough to get started, and he also has some time to learn, as planting and ranching won't happen until spring. The point is, if you can get him to accept the job, he can move in here," he pointed to the cottage they were in, "now and you can start to pay him so he'll be able to eat and have a permanent warm place to stay."

"That makes sense." Harry looked at his godfather. "And then he can help me while I help him."

"Yes. However," Sirius held up a cautioning hand, "you'll need to

meet him alone, say at the Leaky Cauldron - buy him dinner too - and talk him into it. I can't be there or he probably won't accept. But with only you, you'll tug on his heart-strings just enough to overcome his stubbornness - I hope," the last muttered under his breath.

"All right, I will." Harry stood and put out the fire with his wand. "Let's go up to the house and see if everyone is there yet." He shook his head a little, "and get my interrogation from Hermione over."

Sirius laughed hard as they exited the cottage.

Everyone was at the main house and Harry spent the next hour talking about Sirius's plan and how to implement it.

A hand shaking him slightly woke Harry on Christmas morning. Turning from his warm sleeping companion, Harry saw Dobby looking at him. "Dobby?"

"Master Harry, I'm here as you requested. The adults are waking up."

As the grogginess left him, Harry now remembered his order to Dobby so they could avoid Dan, Emma, and Sirius from finding out about their sleeping arrangements.

"Thank you, Dobby. You may return to whatever you were doing." The elf popped away and Harry gave his partner a little shake. "Ginny, you need to get up."

She grabbed him a little tighter. "Sleeping in sometimes is really nice."

He chuckled at her. "It is, but if we want to keep doing this and avoid a confrontation with Dan and Emma, we really should be out of this room before they see us come out."

Ginny sighed and kissed him gently before crawling out. "You have a

point." She grabbed her gown and quietly left for her own room.

Later that morning, Harry reflected on his holiday so far as everyone sat in the living room and talked. None of the adults had said anything about Ginny in his bedroom, so he assumed that secret was good so far. The girls had all liked his presents and he had liked theirs. Of course, Dobby had made a wonderful breakfast and had hinted at what sounded like a great dinner.

He was glad he had sent a small gift to Remus Lupin, as there was one here from the man. He hoped Remus agreed to talk the day after tomorrow. He was also unsure as to why the family friend had not accepted the invitation from Sirius to spend Christmas here with them. The only reason Harry could come up with was that it was Sirius inviting him and not Harry, since it was at Harry's house, but Harry did not think that should have mattered. Remus was a real mystery at times.

"Is everyone ready?" Harry called out to draw all the girls into the front parlor with the Floo connection.

Despite his calm appearance, Harry was nervous about today. He was looking forward to talking to Fred and George, and to see if Ron was still doing well. Even though they were friends now and Harry did care for Ron, they were not very close and so Harry was not sure exactly where they stood. Letters between him and Ron had been few and short.

Then there was Molly. He would not have gone over if Arthur had not promised to be there and he knew Ginny felt the same way.

Hermione led the way in, followed by Gabrielle and then Ginny - all in their coats in case they needed to go outside for any reason, although unbuttoned so as not to be too hot while they were inside.

Harry was about to lead the way through the Floo until his cursory

look at his bond-mates fell on Ginny. Walking over he slowly opened her coat to see more than the few inches of her outfit that was showing. The jumper, jeans, and boots were a nice look on her, but the jumper and jeans were tight and the jumper had a V-neck that barely avoided showing her bra. If they were only staying around the house, he would have smiled and enjoyed it. "Ginny, that's looks really good on you, but are you sure about wearing that in front of your parents?"

She gave him a mischievous smile and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you, Harry, and yes, I'm sure."

"Please tell me why so I know how to act there."

"I know I'm pushing the limits, Harry, but I need to know if my mother will recognize that I'm not a little girl any more ... that I'm not hers to command." She looked at Harry with a hope of acceptance.

He looked her over once more quickly. "Very well." He kissed her back on the cheek. "You're coming last though." She nodded her acceptance of his command. He headed to their destination with a toss of some Floo Powder and a command of "The Burrow".

Harry came out the fireplace on the other end with only a stumble. He notice quickly that Mr Weasley, Bill, Fleur, Percy, Charlie, and Ron were already there and waiting. Turning, he lent a hand as his three bond-mates came out of the fireplace too.

Gabrielle hurried over to Fleur and began chattering quickly in French with a few glances at Bill. Fleur listened patiently with an amused grin as Molly Weasley came to the doorway.

Harry cleared this throat and said, "Gabrielle?" He heard her say in French that Fleur had to tell her all about Bill before she skipped back over to grab Harry's arm. Chuckling at her antics, he turned to their host. "Happy Christmas, Mr and Mrs Weasley, and thank you for

having us over." While he had not named them, he nodded and smiled to the rest there.

"Happy Christmas to you and yours, Harry," Arthur said, "we're glad to see all of you. Please, hang your coats on a peg and have a seat. Oh dear, we're running out of seats..."

"It's not a problem, I'll take care of it," Harry told him as he pulled his wand out and conjured a couch for the four of them in one of the few areas big enough to hold it. As he went to take his seat, he noticed Molly was frowning, although still quiet and in the doorway. He was not sure if she was displeased with him for using magic or Ginny and her attire as she hung the coats for all four of them or perhaps something else. Molly was only looking them all over and not handing out her usual hugs.

"How are you doing, mate?" Ron asked a little hesitantly.

"We're doing very well, Ron. All of us have Exceed Expectations or Outstandings in all of our classes. The Quidditch team that Ginny and I are on won our first game. Err, what else?" He looked at his bond-mates.

"Beauxbatons has been a lot of fun," Ginny said boldly. "Dad, you'd like it. They have a small Muggle village on the school grounds that's set up like non-magical people would live and work in. I think it's very realistic because it's close to what the Grangers live in. It's even got electricity." She glanced at her mother and saw her frown deepen slightly.

Her father chuckled. "Splendid. Perhaps I should come down for a day to see it. I also could try to bring Headmistress Sprout with me to convince her to do the same at Hogwarts."

"Do you like Beauxbatons better than Hogwarts?" Bill asked the group at large, although he looked mostly at Ginny.

"I think I do, but it's mostly because of our situation. I'm not sure Hogwarts would be so..." Ginny shrugged as she searched for what to say.

"Accommodating?" Hermione offered.

"Yes," Ginny said brightly. "Headmistress Maxime has been really good about helping us when we have special needs because of our ... situation, like taking classes together, but most of the time we're treated just like everyone else."

"She does a good job," Harry agreed. "Also, it's been very nice not to have to worry about what's going to happen to us."

"What do you mean?" Charlie asked.

"Without fail," Hermione answered, "something bad has happened to one or all of us at Hogwarts by Halloween. Once or twice it may have been our fault for going somewhere we shouldn't have," she admitted shyly.

"Philosopher's Stone," Harry mumbled.

"But for the most part stuff just happened to us that we couldn't prevent, like the Triwizard Tournament you saw last year," she concluded.

"A troll, possessed diary, basilisk, Dementors, finding a family pet was a disguised Death Eater," Ginny counted off on her fingers before switching to her other hand, "binding contract to a dangerous tournament, dragons, going deep in a lake, a maze of dangerous creatures, kidnapped and then fighting Voldemort in a graveyard. Are ten examples good enough?" she asked sarcastically.

Harry noticed that all of the Weasleys were surprised when hearing

the list all together. He noticed Molly shake her head and return to the kitchen. "So, what has everyone else been doing, other than starting to date?" he asked with a grin and nod towards Bill and Fleur, both of which smiled but otherwise did not rise to the bait.

Fred and George come down during their discussion and added their own brand of humor to the conversation that lasted until lunch. The food was good and Molly behaved herself by mostly staying quiet.

By the time they were ready to leave in the late afternoon, Harry thought the visit had gone much better than he had originally envisioned. Ron was friendly, although not overly so, or at least Harry felt like there was some distance between them. That was probably due to their history and not being in each other's company much anymore he thought.

As they said their good-byes, Molly gave them all a hug, although it was not like the smothering ones she used to hand out, and Harry appreciated the restraint.

Arthur pulled them him to the side at the last second. "Thank you for coming over Harry. Do you think we could do this every year?"

"I think so," Harry replied before hedging a little. "It may not always be on Boxing Day though. We might be busy sometimes, but I think we could find a day during the holidays every year ... maybe during the summer too."

"I understand and that would be appreciated," Arthur told him with a smile and pat on the back.

«Harry, do you mind if I come over after dinner and spend the night and tomorrow at your house?" Fleur asked him.

«No problem. I'm sure Gabrielle would like that.» He was amused at the looks he received from the Weasleys for using French.

After going home, Harry breathed a sigh of relief. "That went better than I expected, but it's still good to be home." All the girls agreed.

When Fleur arrived later, she was beset upon by all three girls. Harry found it amusing and listened in as he looked over some papers about the Potter property that Sirius had given him so he would be ready to talk to Remus tomorrow.

Harry sat in the Leaky Cauldron in the corner and watched the old family friend he was to meet walk in. He had not seen Remus since late August and the man looked a lot more worn, certainly more gaunt. Though he would never do it, Harry wondered what Remus's clothes would look like if he hit him with Finite Incantatem and Transfiguration Reversal spells.

The older man sat down carefully, as with hidden injuries, even though the last full moon was not recent. "Harry."

"Remus, good to see you again. Order whatever you want, it's on me." Harry picked up his own menu.

"I don't really need anything, thank you though."

"It's lunch time, Remus, order something or I'll order something for you. I hate to say it but you don't look too well."

"I'll be fine. Besides, you know of my condition."

"Remus, I can read a calendar and I know the last full moon was almost three weeks ago, yet you look like you haven't had a decent meal in weeks. And let's not forget," Harry grinned ever so slightly, "that I can afford an extra meal or two when needed."

The old werewolf chuckled in defeat and picked up the menu. "You can be just like your father at times."

"I'd like to hope we can continue the family friendship," Harry said encouragingly as he waved Tom's helper over so they could order.

When it was just the two of them again, Harry asked, "So, what have you been doing lately?"

Remus shrugged tiredly. "You know, a little of this, a little of that, whatever I need to so I can survive. What of you and the girls?"

They had told Remus of their bonding, so Harry was not surprised by the question. "We're doing well. We've enjoyed an emergency-free year at Beauxbatons. We also enjoyed Christmas with family a couple of days ago, one you were invited to and didn't come. We did miss you." Harry looked at him pointedly.

Remus shifted uncomfortably and looked around as if searching for their lunch order. "I, uh, I was working, Harry. Thank you for the coat, by the way." He fingered the new coat on the back of his chair.

"Thank you for the pictures of my parents," Harry told him with equal feeling. "They were really brilliant."

"You're welcome," Remus told him with a smile. "I would have given them to you sooner, but I just found them recently, tucked away in an old schoolbook actually."

The slightly uncomfortable silence that developed was broken by the server bringing their lunch.

When it was just them again, Remus looked Harry with careful scrutiny. "Why did you do this, Harry? What did you want to talk about?"

Harry swallowed and chuckled. "I wondered how long it would take you to ask."

"You're as bad as Sirius at times..."

Harry started to laugh. "No, please, any comparison but that!" It made Remus smile at him, as intended. "Remus, I've got a problem and I need your help."

"What about Sirius? He's your godfather."

"He can't really help, he's unavailable," Harry informed him. "I need someone I can trust and someone who's intelligent and someone who's available to help me. I can only think of one person who meets all three conditions."

Remus looked at him suspiciously. "What do you want?"

"I need a foreman for my property. I've got about a thousand acres that have been just sitting there since my parents left years ago. That was fine for a few years or so. But I've been told people in the area are starting to ask questions about how the property can be maintained and such when there's no one living there and the land isn't being worked. The Muggles are starting to notice and I need for that to quit so questions don't get asked that would require Obliviation. Remus, I need you come live there and start ranching or farming and I'm willing to pay you as this is a real job."

Remus blinked in wonder as he took the explanation in. "You can't be serious..." He quickly held up his hand at the mischievous look that came over Harry. "Don't do the name joke. Are you serious? No, you can't be, I don't have any experience like that..." He started trying to talk them both out of the idea.

Harry sighed. "Remus, did you have any teaching experience before you taught at Hogwarts for that one year?"

"No, but-"

"You're not looking at this from my side, Remus. My first condition is someone I can trust. The list of adults I can trust is very short and I think you're the only one who's either without a job or has a job that can be ended soon."

"Maybe, Harry, but I still don't know a thing about ranching or farming."

"So what, you'll learn and you've got three months to learn, to talk to people, to read books, whatever. You're intelligent so I know you can do this." Harry stared at him, trying to will him to take the job.

"I don't know, Harry..."

"Damn it! Remus!" Harry hissed, trying to keep the volume of his frustration low. "I need your help. I'll accept a 'no' if you really can't do it, but you have to give me a real reason other than you don't think you can."

"It's not that simple, it's complicated..." Remus looked frustrated in trying to explain it.

Harry stared at him trying to divine the problem. A thought suddenly hit him. "This is about my parents, isn't it? How they wouldn't trust you and left you out, so you're trying to keep only the loosest friendship with me, isn't it?"

"What?!" Remus surprised himself with his outburst and put a fist over his mouth as if trying to stifle a cough.

"If an official apology is what you need, I'll do it. I, Harry James Potter and Head of the House of Potter, do give you an official family apology in accordance to the old ways," as Sirius as taught me, "for ignoring you and treating you badly in 1981. I hereby acknowledge and renew your friendship with the House of Potter and will make

restitution for the slight as I am able."

Remus looked at him wide-eyed without blinking for such a far-reaching apology. "Harry, you didn't have to... I mean ..."

"It was the right thing to do," the young man pointedly.

"You still didn't have to, but I accept and thank you for your graciousness. No restitution beyond friendship is required."

Harry nodded. "Good, then when can you start? There's a cottage there you can live in and there's also pay so you buy other things you need."

"I ... my condition..." Remus shook his head and looked down.

"Moony," he said softly, causing the man to look up slowly. "I need you. The House of Potter needs you. As long as you don't betray us, which I don't think you ever would," Remus shook his head vigorously, "you can live and work there for as long as you want. We also have a stone shed you can use once a month. Moony, this isn't charity; help me and I'll help you."

The quiet appeal after the outburst did its job. Remus slowly nodded.

"Splendid. You're already keyed into the wards, so you can come as soon as you want. Do you need to give notice for your current job?" Harry doubted there was a current job, but he had to make this look "normal".

"I need to tell them, but I don't need to go in anymore."

"Then take care of that and get your things and come to the house. We have a place for you." Harry grinned. "And you can tell me more stories about my parents as well as the ones that Sirius won't tell me."

Remus's haggard look softened into a smile as he thought that through. "There are a few times I'm sure he'd overlook, like when he snuck some Fire Whisky into the dorm rooms in his seventh year and McGonagall caught him drunk and your father tried to cover for him."

Harry laughed at the idea. "Yeah, stories like that."

They soon parted and Harry went home and directed Dobby to clean the cottage for Remus, to find out that Dobby had anticipated him and already done it. A couple of hours later, Remus arrived and was settled into his new house.

Sirius also came over for dinner that evening and was glad to see his old friend. Remus gave him a few suspicious looks but said nothing about whether he thought Sirius had meddled or not.

Fleur left for home after dinner and a long hug from her sister.

Dobby popped in front of Harry the next morning while he was going over a list of things for Remus to look into. "Your friends have arrived, Master Harry."

"Thank you, Dobby. Please show them to the living room and go tell the other girls."

With a nod, Dobby popped away and Remus left as well.

Harry looked around the library and finally spotted Hermione reading in chair near the fireplace. "Hermione?"

"I heard," she said distractedly as she marked her place in a book while trying to finish the page.

When she made it over to him, still reading, he gently took the book from her, closed it completely, and set it on the table. "It'll be there

when we get back."

She sighed slowly. "I know, I was in a good part though."

Harry chuckled as he led her out of the library on his arm. "Why didn't the Sorting Hat put you in Ravenclaw?"

"Because I asked it for Gryffindor and told it I wouldn't accept anything less." At his raised eyebrow, she sheepishly looked forward. "I knew you were going to be in Gryffindor, and I wanted to be there too. You were friendly to me, one of the few on the train."

"Good thing I didn't let the Hat put me in Slytherin then," he teased her gently.

"It is," she told him imperiously, teasing him back as they walked into the living room. Ginny and Gabrielle were already there and hugging Neville and Luna; Hermione left Harry's arm and did the same.

Harry hugged his friends too before saying, "It's really good to see you two again - have a seat." He did not fail to notice that they did not sit closely together nor did they hold hands. He was not the only one to notice.

"What happened with you two?" Ginny asked, looking carefully at each of them, trying to figure out what was going on. Her question triggered scrutiny from the other two girls.

Neville blushed ever so slightly and looked at Luna.

"I told you Ginny would be the first to ask," the blonde told him casually but kept staring at him.

Neville became very self-conscious from all the scrutiny. "Err, we, uh, that is, Luna ... and I, me, well, we decided not to date anymore." As the looks from his friends intensified, he hurried on. "We both

decided that and we're still friends - really!"

Four sets of eyes turned to Luna. She returned the stares without concern. "I don't think he was infected with Wrackspurts, but what he said is true. We did decide to break up about a week ago and we are still friends."

Ginny moved over to her friend and put an arm around her shoulders. "How are you doing? With the breakup, I mean?"

Luna shrugged and looked at her hands. "I'm fine, I think."

Not looking entirely convinced, Ginny tightened her grip on the girl and stood, pulling her up too. "Let's go talk about it." She led the blonde out of the room and Hermione and Gabrielle went too, each with less than pleased looks, including a frosty glance at Neville.

Neville sighed and leaned forward, putting his elbow on his knees and looking at the floor. "Are you upset with me too?"

Harry snorted. "Me? No, I'm not upset. Whatever happened was up to the two of you." He looked around quickly and ensured they were the only two in the room; they were, but he lowered his voice anyway. "I think the girls are forgetting that Luna is in a different situation from them. You two aren't bonded, and so you're going to date multiple people before you find that special someone for you."

With a pleased look, Neville raised his head and looked at his friend. "Thanks, Harry."

"No problem, mate," Harry said with a momentary lopsided grin. "Don't worry though, the girls will come around, they just need a little time. So, tell me about Hogwarts?"

Neville relaxed and leaned back in his chair. "Like I mentioned in the letters, it's going well. I like the new teachers, and the two extra

teachers they hired means there is more likely to be teacher around if someone tries something they shouldn't, as Fred and George have found a few times," he said with a grin. With a shrug he added, "I like it most of the time now."

"Most of the time?" asked Harry.

Neville looked down as if he could not look at Harry. "Some things aren't for the better." He suddenly looked up. "You're not there, and Hermione and Ginny too. I do like Malfoy being gone, but school is more boring now also."

"I'm sorry," he said sounding truly sympathetic. "I'd invite you to Beauxbatons, but unless you already know French fluently..."

A shake of Neville's head answered the implied question.

"It'll be summers and holidays then."

"Thanks for being a real friend, Harry."

"As are you. Oi! I've got a project you can help me with while you're here. Grab your coat." Harry called Dobby to get his from wherever it was and the two friends walked out the back door.

"This is really nice, Harry," Neville said as he looked around. "You definitely fit in with the other Pureblood families."

Harry chuckled. "Thanks, I think," which caused Neville to chuckle as well. "I want to install a Greenhouse out here somewhere and I'd like your opinion on the best location and size. My mum had planned to put one in, or so the family journal says, but it never got built."

"This is the best time of year to plan one," Neville told him. "We have the longest shadows of the year now, so we know where not to put it. I'd suggest over there," he pointed to an open area not too far from

the house. "It'll get good sun in the summer there too. I've got a 16x20 greenhouse and it works pretty well for us, but it depends on what you want to use it for."

"I was thinking mostly common potion ingredients and some food things. Maybe the next size bigger?"

"You could, but it depends on the costs of each. You might be better doing two smaller ones," Neville advised him.

"Make sense. Help me stake it out," asked Harry. So the Harry transfigured four sticks into large stakes and the two of them put the stakes at about the place the four corners would go, with Neville pointing out the best orientation.

Back inside, Harry led them to the library, where he expected to find the girls. He was correct and saw them all gathered around Luna, who was searching the shelves for something. Ginny saw them first and nudge the other two Potter girls before walking over. Harry noticed that Neville looked a little apprehensive. He also noticed that the girls looked a little guilty, so he did not worry.

"Neville," Ginny looked him right in the eyes. "I'm sorry I jumped to the wrong conclusion. Luna told us we were being a prat about it." She took the last step forward and gave Neville a short hug.

"Yes, I'm sorry too," Hermione said as she stepped forward.

"And me," Gabrielle added when Hermione stepped back.

Harry watched his friend become redder with each hug. When Gabrielle stepped back from her turn, Harry was sure Neville was not capable of blushing any harder and he had trouble not laughing at his embarrassed friend.

"Err, th-thanks," Neville managed to say.

"It won't happen again," promised Hermione. The other two nodded solemnly.

"Here it is," Luna announced from the other side of the room.

Hermione rushed over and Harry was barely able to grab Ginny's arm before she left. "What?"

Ginny beamed at him. "Hermione remembered to ask Luna about that symbol we were searching for and Luna knew what it was. She also said that I should have known and that we probably had the book here, so she's been searching for it."

"A children's book?" Hermione asked, looking at Luna as if she could not believe it.

Ginny saw the cover as she walked over. "The Tales of Beedle the Bard." She tilted her head and thought for a moment. "Oh, the story of the three brothers versus Death. Yes, I should have remembered." She looked at Harry with a gleam.

"What?" Hermione asked, exasperated.

Luna took the book back and opened it to a story before handing it back, then she recited the story of the three brother and their meeting with Death, and their artifacts, all from memory. "Daddy finds it fascinating," she said at the end.

"This means you could talk to your parents," Ginny exclaimed. At an intense look from Luna, Ginny's eyes went wide and she slapped her hands over her mouth. "Sorry," she said in a very tiny voice.

Harry looked at Luna and Neville as he tried to figure out what to say.

"Don't worry," Neville told him with a grin. "I won't tell anyone what

you may or may not have," showing that while he was in Gryffindor, he was not stupid.

Harry gave him a nod and looked at Luna.

Luna stared at him without blinking for a long moment. "I won't tell, but..." Her eyes started to tear and she could not seem to continue - her normally even personality gone.

Understanding her need, as it was much like his, he opened his arms to her and Luna stepped in. As he gave her a hug and patted her on the back, he looked over her shoulder at Ginny. "Since you spilled the beans, you get to go upstairs and dig the ring out of my trunk."

Ginny's expression wavered between guilt and happiness, but she nodded and hurried out of the library.

He let go of Luna and turned to Neville. "I'd make you the same offer, mate, but your parents are still on this side of life."

Neville, nodded his thanks and turned slightly, suddenly becoming interested in looking at the large library.

Ginny soon returned and handed the ring to Harry. Not really knowing what to do with it, he handed it to Luna. She examined it carefully for a couple of minutes while the others watched, even Neville.

Finally, she thrust the ring on her finger and turned it three times. A second later, she turned slightly and said, "Mummy?" in the voice of a little girl.

Harry could see nothing unusual, but he watched Luna reach out and take a step forward as if walking to something, or someone that he could not see.

"I ... But I thought you ... Oh, mummy, mummy..." Luna sank to her knees and tears started to flow down her face. She nodded slowly for a minute before quietly saying, "I understand. I love you too." Slowly, she pulled the ring off of her finger and let it drop to the floor before burying her face in her hands.

Ginny immediately moved over and put her arm around the girl's shoulders and comforted her.

Harry looked over at Hermione and saw her looking at him pointedly. "I don't know if I want to do it now," he said to the obvious question. He thought he had spoken quietly, but Luna looked directly at him.

"You still should," the quirky blonde told him, "but only once." She wiped her final tears away. "Mum said I wasn't the cause of her death; I had always wondered. She also said I shouldn't tell Dad about this. Thank you for letting me say good-bye to her."

"You're welcome." It seemed Luna was a little more focused than before, or so Harry thought.

The friends enjoyed the rest of the day together and promised to get together again in the summer.

The night before they were supposed to return to the Grangers for the rest of the holidays, Harry gathered all of his girls in his bedroom after the Granger adults had retired to their bedroom. The ring with the Resurrection Stone lay on the floor in front of him, as they all sat on the floor with Ginny and Gabrielle on each side and Hermione behind him with her hands on his shoulders. He gathered his courage, but still could not quite bring himself to pick up the ring.

"You can do it, Harry," Hermione encouraged him gently. "We're all right here and you can take it off at any time." The other two girls agreed, encouraging him in the same way.

With a deep breath and thinking of his parents mightily, he grabbed the ring and stuck it on in one swift motion, then turned it around as he had seen Luna do. On the third twist, two images faded in in the open area in front of him. He could still see the room, but his focus was entirely on the two pale images that were looking down at him in affection. "Mum? Dad?"

"Yes, Harry, it's us, or what passes for us here," his father told him.

"I don't understand."

"The Stone is a bridge to the other dimension we all refer to as the afterlife," his mother explained. "It won't allow us to truly come back, but it does allow a reflection of us, or perhaps a shade, to extend back here for a short time. We shouldn't stay too long, but it is good to see you like this," she paused and looked around him, "surrounded by your family."

"I wished you could stay here..." Harry choked up on his overwhelming emotion.

"Son, we would like nothing more, but it's not to be. In fact, I hope we don't see you again for many many years to come."

"And many children later," his mother added quickly.

"It's your choice, son, but I would tell you to put this Stone, and should you ever find the matching Wand, in your vault and leave them there. The wand especially is a very dangerous thing and a number of people would readily kill you to get their hands on that particular wand."

"I understand, Dad." Harry choked on the last word and he had to say it again. "Dad." He looked over and said, "Mum," just because he could.

Lily Potter knelt down so she was eye-level with her son. "Harry, I do have one very important thing to say before we go. While I wished we had been here to protect you so you would have never had to find your special magic, you do have three very wonderful young ladies - each very special in her own way."

He nodded; he could not agree more.

"I admire your efforts to treat each of them the same way and that's good most of the time; however, you must also never forget that they are individuals, each with individual needs. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Yes, Mum. I need to do what right for the person."

"That's right. If you do, you will have relationships that will be indescribable to almost everyone else." She let a grin come over her. "Although I do expect the one person who will understand and that you'll be able to relate to will make himself known one day."

"Who?" he asked eagerly.

"I think it's best if I don't say, as he might not contact you. If he does contact you, follow your heart, my son."

Harry nodded, feeling choked up again as his mother stood and his father came down on one knee.

"Harry, I too have one special bit of advice to give you. There are times life is serious and you need to pay attention to the world around you. For example, there is one person whom you know that is a real threat to you." His father paused and looked at him.

After a moment, he said, "Croaker?"

His father chuckled. "Not really. He's more neutral; be careful around

him, but he's not a threat to you if you aren't to him. No, I mean Dumbledore. He's still alive."

"I had forgotten."

James Potter nodded. "That is why I'm reminding you. My advice is to be aware, yet enjoy your life wherever you find yourself. Enjoy your family as much as possible. My only regret in dying so young is that I would have liked more time with you and to help you grow up - to just enjoy life with you."

Again, Harry only nodded, not able to speak.

His father stood. "I think it time, son. Know that we've always loved you and always will. We'll see you again one day, but take your time and enjoy life..."

"Even if it's hundreds of years," his mother said with a special smile.

"Huh?" he blurted out.

"Wizards can live a long time, son. As your father said, enjoy it and know that we love you very much." She blew him a kiss affectionately.

"Remember, hide the ring and the wand. Don't tempt yourself or anyone else," his father said firmly but lovingly. "The cloak doesn't stand out so you can use it."

"I will. Good-bye..." It was not until he took the ring off and let it drop to the floor that he realized his face was wet. Wiping away the tears, he found his whole face needed attention and wondered how long he had cried.

Gabrielle was the first to fling herself at Harry and the other two girls followed her example quickly.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked.

Harry sniffled once before he said, "Yeah, I am. Luna's right, only once. My dad also said to put the ring and the wand if I ever find it in my vault and don't tell anyone."

Without waiting, Hermione let go and moved around to pick up the ring. "Dobby?" she called.

The house-elf popped in. "Yes, Mistress?"

She handed him the ring. "Please put this in the house vault." She stopped for a minute and frowned. "The house does have a vault for important things, doesn't it?"

"Yes, Mistress. It's in the Master's personal study and I'll put it there." Dobby popped away, leaving the four to themselves again.

Kneeling again, Hermione asked, "What did they say?"

He felt his eyes get watery but he also knew he was grinning widely. "They said they loved me and that you're all wonderful and my family." All three hugged him tightly. "They also said they didn't want to see us until after a long time and after a lot of children." He blushed with them. "And we might meet someone who'd understand us." At their looks of surprise, he quickly added, "Mum said he might not contact us, but she sounded like she thought he would."

"I wonder who," Hermione said quietly.

"She wouldn't say," he told her.

"It was strange watching you talk to someone when we couldn't see them," Gabrielle said.

"But we're all glad you did talk to them," Ginny told him.

"Come to bed, Harry." Hermione gripped one arm and lifted gently as she stood, causing him to stand as well.

As Gabrielle and Ginny rose, he gave each a hug and a chaste kiss. Hermione was last and he gave her a slightly longer hug and kiss. "Thank you," he whispered.

A minute later, all four were in bed and snuggling together on their sides, with Hermione in front of him and the other two behind him. Remembering his mother's advice, he slowly moved his hand over and gently squeezed and then held one of her breasts as they all went to sleep.

Harry awoke slowly the next morning, taking stock of who he was with and where his hands were - his usual first task in the morning. From the curves against him and under one hand, it was obvious he was still curled around Hermione. Twisting his neck, he saw the warmth behind him came from Gabrielle, with Ginny snuggled against the younger girl.

Gabrielle still amazed him. She was now taller than his chin and she was starting to fill out and look more grown up. He wondered if by the time Gabrielle's next birthday came if there would be any significant physical difference between her and Ginny. If so, that would make things both easier and harder.

Thinking it was about time to get up and he felt like having a little fun, he started to softly caress the soft T-shirt covered mound under his hand. It did not take long for Hermione to softly moan and then for her hand to fly up grab his as she became fully awake.

"Harry, no," she whispered, causing him to grin.

"Yeah, Harry," he heard whispered from behind him, "don't do that

unless you do it to me too."

"And me," a third voice chimed in as a hand moved around his middle and lightly ran over his side.

"Hmm," he said amusedly.

"No, get that thought out of your head," Hermione told him sternly as she rolled over to face him.

"Hey, I didn't say anything bad," he defended himself.

"It wasn't hard to guess what you were thinking though." The glare from the brunette was a minor one.

Harry was saved from more reproofs and glares when Dobby suddenly popped into the room. "Mistresses must leave quickly! Dobby was not paying attention and the adults are up!" He started hitting his forehead with his hand.

The bond-mates all looked at one another for a long second in surprise before trying to spring out of bed, only to hit heads, tangle limbs, and generally not really go anywhere. A knock on the door caused them all to freeze and Dobby to pop away.

"We know you're all in there and we're coming in," the muffled voice of Dan Granger said through the door.

Harry sat on the bed in shock as their secret came undone. The girls all instinctually grabbed the sheet and held it to their chest as the door was opened to reveal Dan and Emma Granger, as well as Sirius behind them.

While Dan and Emma looked upset, Sirius seemed to be having great difficulty holding in his laughter, his face turning redder and redder as his smile grew.

"If you'll get dressed, we can talk about this over breakfast," Emma told them, but making no move of her own.

With her head hung, Hermione crawled out of bed and headed for her room looking guilty. Ginny and Gabrielle followed with their heads held only a little higher.

Harry was not sure how to feel, but he did his best to keep an even expression, although his emotions were all over the place.

"At least everyone was clothed," Emma said with some disdain before she led the adults away.

By the time he was dressed, Harry's feelings had mostly settled. He stopped by Hermione's room to talk as she was finishing getting ready.

"I think we should use this to settle our summer schedule," he told her as Ginny walked in.

"We might as well," she agreed, but Harry could tell she was still uncomfortable with it by how she said it.

In truth, he was uncomfortable too as the Grangers had been wonderful about taking him in so he did not have to stay with the Dursleys, but felt he had to go through with it. He was the head of his house.

In the hallway, Gabrielle was waiting for them so they went down as a united group.

Sirius was still grinning as he looked up at them from his breakfast. Dan and Emma still wore displeased looks. The four bond-mates sat at their usual places and started dishing up breakfast.

"I suppose," Dan started, "this sleeping arrangement is why you wanted to stay here for the holidays?"

"It was one of several reasons," Harry admitted slowly.

"As Sirius pointed out, I suppose you weren't breaking our rule, but only because of the technicality of location." Dan did not seem happy to admit that.

Harry almost said that was his view, but decided that staying silent might be better. The girls followed his lead.

"Can you at least explain why?" Dan finally asked after a moment.

"We asked to stay here to avoid breaking your rule, and because we've become used to sleeping together," Harry explained, realizing he had just opened Pandora's box, but feeling honesty was best for this conversation.

"You sleep together at school?" Emma asked, shocked.

"We do." He did not understand her reaction.

"So you let your girls come into the boys' dorm and let your dorm mates see them in their pyjamas? Regularly?"

Harry thought he now understood Emma's shock. He had not considered what it must look like to them. He thought of their little suite as normal now and had forgotten they would not know of it.

"That doesn't happen," Hermione said quickly, then looked over at Harry and back down, not having meant to speak out.

"Oh? How is that possible?" Emma asked pointedly.

Harry almost sighed, but managed to keep it in. "Because of our

magical relationship, the Headmistress allowed us to have a suite of rooms to ourselves. We each have our bedroom, but we also have privacy from the rest of the dorm. We consider it a privilege and we try not to abuse it by isolating ourselves, so we try to spend as much time as possible in the common area around others. But at night, we can sleep as we wish."

"We are still abiding by our age plan," Hermione quickly added, "and Gabrielle never sleeps alone with Harry." Gabrielle nodded to confirm the statement.

Silence ruled for a long moment and the bond-mates looked at each other a little uncomfortably. None of them wanted to disappoint the Grangers, but they also wanted to live their life their own way.

A soft chuckle broke the silence and everyone turned to look at Sirius. "What?" he asked the room at large. "It's really not all that bad and it is amusing on several different levels, or it is if you're me."

"Perhaps you could explain that," Emma said a little testily.

"Emma, I can see you're not happy about this, but they were trying to do the right thing by you. You gave them a rule and they followed it. True," he held up his hand to stop her protest, "they only followed the letter and not the spirit of the rule, but they did follow it. They also are sticking to their plan for age appropriate behavior. I really have to commend them for that, considering they could do anything when away at school and many of my classmates would have done that if they'd had the opportunity."

Sirius looked right at Harry. "That includes your father." His grin returned. "Your father would have been laughing his arse off at your predicament and your mother probably would have found it amusing after an initial reaction like Emma's. That's what I meant by it being amusing if you're me. The dynamic between James and Lily was almost always entertaining."

"But Sirius, they're ... they're ..." Emma shook her head, unable to go on and Dan nodded in agreement to the unspoken argument.

"They said they're not, but even if they are, sometimes kids will be kids," Sirius said with a shrug. "Even if they lived at home with you, they'd still have the opportunity to do all the things you don't want." He muttered, "I know I did a lot of things my parents didn't like when I was that age."

"But that doesn't excuse them," Emma argued back.

Sirius shrugged. "Maybe not, but I still don't think it's as bad as you're making it." He ran his fingers through his hair and looked at the bond-mates for a moment, all sitting silently and waiting to see what Sirius said. "Dan, Emma, to state the obvious, at your house it's your rules, right?"

"Yes," Emma agreed with Dan nodding his agreement.

"So why isn't it Harry's rules at Harry's house?" The Grangers just blinked at him, as if that had not occurred to them. "Also, just maybe, I don't see this as all that bad because I can see they're growing up. Sure, they aren't there yet at fifteen, but they are growing up. I moved out of my parents' house and moved in with the Potters just after I turned sixteen. Charles, James's father, let me do pretty much what I wanted as long as I didn't act unreasonable, that is, as long as I did basically what James did. Since Harry is about that age, as long as he doesn't do anything too stupid," he paused and looked at Harry pointedly, "like getting one of the girls pregnant," he grinned as all four of them turned beet red, "I think I'm fine with it all."

Dan and Emma looked at each other, having a silent conversation.

Harry lightly cleared his throat. "We also wanted to say that we plan to live here most of this coming summer. We're willing to help you

with Portkeying between here and your house at any time you like so you can stay with us and we can spend time together, but we want to stay here."

"You know, that could be a good compromise. You could even do that for the rest of the holidays," Sirius suggested.

"Whose side are you on?" Emma asked, although there was no force or bitterness in her tone.

"I'm on the side of trying to make Harry happy while also being reasonable. Yeah, I know, I can't believe I'm being this much of an adult either," Sirius told them with a grin.

Dan sighed. "Fine, we'll stay here the rest of the holidays and you have to help us get back to the house when we need to, but we want to think about this summer."

The bond-mates all smiled boldly. "Thank you," Harry told the Grangers fervently.

"We can change our minds though if the situation warrants," Emma added.

The teens nodded, understanding they would need to be on their best behavior.

(A/N: Thanks to XVRaider1 for continuing to beta this story!)

Chapter 31 - Growing Up

It was a slightly cool but otherwise beautiful spring day in late March that found the bond-mates out in the "Muggle village". It was a semi-popular place to go when the weather was nice. Hermione and Gabrielle had come, along with other students, and were doing homework on one of the several picnic tables that were present. Harry was helping Ginny with her homework by showing her a car the school had for show in the fake village. It could not be driven, but Harry was explaining the basics of driving it and how it worked, based on what Dan had explained to him months ago.

"This is the engine area," Harry said, pointing to the area under the open bonnet, or hood. As you can see, it also has a large battery to help it start. The tank for the petrol is in the back and -"

A loud crack and a wave of magic rolled over them, stopping Harry and causing him to instinctively draw his wand; Ginny mimicked his reaction. There, barely ten feet on the other side of the car, stood Albus Dumbledore with his wand in hand. His purple robe looked rumpled and his beard and hair looked like they had not been combed recently.

Turning slightly, Dumbledore looked right at them. "Harry, we must talk and you must come with me. I'm sorry, my boy, but there is still more you must do." He was interrupted by two men running through the portal doorway from the school.

«Stop! Drop your wand!» one of the men shouted.

Harry recognized the two men as part of the school security. An idea came to him and he dropped to one knee behind the car, yanking on Ginny's arm to pull her behind the cover too.

"I have no quarrel with you," Dumbledore replied, "and my mission is important to everyone in the world. Do not hinder me or I shall be

forced to incapacitate you."

Harry tapped his wand on Ginny's head and she faded from sight. "When spells start flying, you cast under the car and transfigure the ground under him to water, a small area but as deep as you can so he falls. Draw power from me if you have to." She whispered that she would and he crawled to the rear end of the car.

Another sharp crack sounded from near the portal. "Professor Dumbledore, what are you doing here?" the voice of the Headmistress called.

Harry looked around the back bumper just enough to see Hermione and Gabrielle across the way. He waved at them with his wand while still trying to stay far enough behind the car that Dumbledore could not see him.

"Madame Maxime," Dumbledore said genially although never lowering his wand, "I'm sorry I must intrude upon your school, but Harry must come with me to finish a task.

Gabrielle finally noticed Harry, so he mimed casting a spell at Dumbledore. She nodded and nudged Hermione with her elbow and whispered, causing Hermione to move her head ever so slightly so he could know she was looking at him.

"I'm afraid that is not possible, Dumbledore." Dismay was clearly evident in the Headmistress's voice. "You must drop your wand and surrender for this violation of our school."

Harry mimed again and Hermione's right eyebrow went up in surprise. He mimed a third time, more emphatically this time. She finally nodded and he could see her slowly go for her wand.

"And I'm afraid I can't do that, my dear."

Harry held up his hand with fingers spread and slowly started dropping fingers.

"Young Harry must come with me. It is either that or Voldemort will take over the world."

One second after he reached one finger, Harry pointed at his bond-mates across the way. He felt a strong pull on his magic, and then two more in quick succession.

Gabrielle suddenly jumped up from her table, transforming as she moved, and threw a fireball from each hand at Dumbledore. Hermione moved too, but her first act was to shove the table forward to act as a physical shield before casting a Stunning spell at the old man.

Apparently, that was all the motivation the security men needed to start casting their own spells, although theirs were more vicious. Dumbledore shielded from it all only to lose his balance and drop the shield as the ground beneath his feet suddenly became liquid. Two more fireballs were hurled at him faster than he could create a shield, forcing him to dunk himself in the waist deep water to avoid getting burned.

As Dumbledore came back up from underwater, leading with his wand already in motion towards the security men, Harry pulled all the magic he could from his bond-mates and silently summoned the wand from the man's hand, ripping it from his grasp so hard it spun him around to face Harry with shock on his face. A Stunning spell from Madam Maxime hit the intruder in the back and ended the fight.

Harry caught the old man's wand when it reached him and as he stood up from behind the car. Slowly, he walked over to where Dumbledore was slumped over the edge of the hole in the ground, his lower half still in the water. "Take that you old idiot." It was only then that his father's warning sprang to memory and Harry silently

berated himself for not being more careful.

«Is anyone hurt?» the Headmistress called out in a loud voice. Students from around village started to slowly poke their heads out from whatever hiding place had been closest. The two other teachers who had been with the students in the Muggle buildings started going around checking on them all.

As if struck, Harry finally realized what he had done. Turning to the head of the school, he said, «My apologies, Headmistress. Trouble came and I just reacted. I should have let you handle it.»

An amused look crept into her expression. «Yes, you should have, but I do appreciate your help.» She looked around and saw Hermione and Gabrielle walking to Harry. «But where is Mlle Weasley?»

Without really looking, Harry pointed his wand to his side and casually said, "Finite." Ginny faded into view as she walked around the front of the car.

Maxime blinked at that, wondering how he had known where the young woman was that exactly when Maxime herself had not been able to see her. Something about their bond was the only thing she could think of. «Yes, well, it is good all of you are uninjured.»

One of the men spoke quietly to the Headmistress. She nodded and turned back. «M Potter, I shall need his wand so it can be checked.»

Dumbledore had already been pulled from the water, searched, tied up, and then awakened. He saw Harry about to hand the wand over and cried out, "No! He must keep the wand! It is the only way he can defeat Voldemort! He must have the wand and he needs my tutelage!"

A security man stunned the old man. «My pardon, Headmistress, I

thought it wouldn't hurt to waken him. We'll need to take him in, his wand too.»

The Headmistress took the wand from Harry and touched her wand to it, causing images of spells to rise from it. The three adults looked with rapt attention. After the seven images stopped, the Headmistress peered carefully at the strange looking wand. «I see nothing unusual cast from this, other than the ward weakening spell.»

After another long look at it, she held it out for Harry. «I think Dumbledore has gone insane, but he normally had good reasons for what he did. On my authority, please take this to your home next week, M Potter, and store it in a safe place. Then should you need it for reasons only he knows, you will have it.»

«I will.» Harry slipped the old wand into his robes before pulling each of the girls into a hug, thanking each for helping and that he was glad they were safe.

Dumbledore, looking something like a wet and bedraggled rat, was taken away. Everyone else was guided back to the castle until the wards on the area could be repaired and strengthened.

-0-

That evening, all the dorm chaperones and aides ensured that everyone attended dinner. It was obvious the teachers knew why, based on their expressions, but none of said anything when asked.

While the Headmistress normally sat at a table like any other teacher, this evening she came in just as dinner was starting and asked the teacher at Harry's table to take another place so she could sit there. Harry saw Hermione giving him a curious look, but all he could do was shrug. The girl did not ask the Headmistress about the switch. As dinner progressed, the Headmistress talked and answered

questions like any other teacher.

Midway through dinner, the Headmistress smiled at them all and said, «I believe it is time I satisfied Mlle Granger's curiosity,» as she stood.

Hermione looked very surprised by the woman's comment while the rest of the bond-mates chuckled or giggled.

The room went quiet almost instantly as the Headmistress moved to one side of the room so everyone could see her. Her booming voice needed no magical help to be heard throughout the room. «I hope everyone has had a good spring term so far. I am happy to report that the number of demerits this term is lower than normal at this point in the term and your grades are where they should be. Please keep up the good work.

«I also hope everyone understands the need for proper security, based on today's incident in our Muggle Village.» She smiled slightly at the murmured agreements. «To satisfy your curiosity, I do not have the official report yet, but I believe they will tell me that M Dumbledore is suffering from insanity due to his advanced age and was not in full control of himself. Our security team responded promptly and those students there took cover quickly as best they could, which was the correct action to take.»

The Headmistress looked at Harry and a mischievous look appeared. «The Potters came out hiding to help capture M Dumbledore. While I appreciate their help, I also appreciate the rest of you hiding and letting the security team and myself handle the situation. M Potter has told me he will avoid such situations in the future.» She gave him a nod and he returned it. «The portal to our village will be closed for the next several days while the wards there are repaired and strengthened.

«To the main reason everyone was called here this evening,» she paused as murmurs arose briefly, everyone thinking discussion of the

attack was the main reason. «Our school's board and the ICW have come to an agreement on what to do about the overcrowding at this school.»

More excited murmurs swept across the room.

«By far, the most common suggestion was to build another wing. One young lady suggested that we build two wings, if we're going to the trouble of building.» The Headmistress looked over at Hermione and smiled. «However, we will not be building any time in the near future.»

«Mlle Dufour, please come forward.» As a sixth year girl from the green dorm came forward, the Headmistress continued. «Mlle Dufour suggested that we build a new school. While that was not a new idea, her suggestion for where to build it was and the ICW like it too. Therefore, this coming summer, construction will start on a new major school of magic in the northern mountains of Greece.»

Everyone applauded loudly and the girl blushed.

«Starting a little more than a year from now, or in the fall of 1996, the school will be built enough to begin accepting students for the first and second years. The rest of the years will begin the following year when construction is expected to be completed. It is not yet known what the official language of the school will be, but we'll have more information next year.» She looked down at the student. «Please come to my office tomorrow morning and I'll give you your prize.» The girl happily returned to her place and everyone clapped for her again.

«Mlle Brun, please come forward.» A fourth year girl from the yellow dorm arose and joined the Headmistress. «Mlle Brun suggested that since the overcrowding is affecting the dorm chaperones the most, that we hire an extra set of chaperones per dorm to help in the duties and that they could live in one of the unused married suites. I liked

this idea for its practical approach and we will do that starting next year and for the next five or so years. Please come to my office tomorrow morning for your prize and everyone please congratulate Mlle Brun.»

Everyone clapped as the girl returned to her seat with a very happy expression.

«Mlle Weasley, please come forward.» As Ginny blushed and walked over, the Headmistress explained her idea. «Mlle Weasley told us that Hogwarts in Britain has more room than it has students and suggested we arrange a transfer program, much as they had transferred here. I have talked with the other schools and the new Headmaster Steinhoff at Durmstrang has agreed to allow up to eight students to transfer to his school, should any wish to. Be aware that you must be fluent in German and be starting the third year or higher to attend.»

A few students whispered excitedly, causing Harry to assume they knew German and might want to go.

«The newly appointed Headmistress Sprout at Hogwarts has agreed to allow up to twenty students to attend. You must be fluent in English and at least in second year to attend there.» She looked around the room. «If anyone would like to be considered for transferring to either school, please talk with your parents and see me after you return from our upcoming spring holiday.» Looking at Ginny, she said, «Please see me later for your prize.»

Everyone clapped for Ginny as she took her seat.

«I hope everyone has an enjoyable break starting tomorrow evening. Please do well in your classes tomorrow before you leave.» The Headmistress returned to her seat beside Harry.

Leaning over, Madame Maxime said softly, «Please bring your family

to my office after dinner.»

Harry had a good idea what it was about, but was a little unsure. He nodded anyway.

Hermione spoke up. «Headmistress, why won't you build a new wing? You have the land to do it.»

«Yes, we do,» Maxime said with a smile. «However, the overcrowding is not so severe yet. Also, once the school in Greece is built, we expect our enrollment to drop at least twenty percent, perhaps even a little more. A number of students from that region attend here because they have no major school in that area. As M Potter suggested,» surprising Harry that she even remembered what he had written for the assignment, «there need not be one solution to solve the whole problem. The Board of Governors was already considering implementing two other solutions at the same time, so adding a few more will help even more. The overcrowding problem will not be so bad in two years and should be solved in about five years.»

«I see, thank you, Headmistress,» Hermione said, pleased with the detailed answer.

As everyone started to leave after dinner, the Headmistress looked at Harry as she rose. Harry nodded to her and motioned to his girls to follow him.

In the Headmistress's office, the tall woman directed them her sitting area. «Mlle Weasley, do you have a preference for your prize? We can do that now too.»

«I think I'll take the money,» she said excitedly. «I'd like to get a professional level broom when I finish school.»

«As you wish.» She opened a drawer in her desk and pulled a few

things out before joining them in her special chair that fit her frame perfectly. A small pouch was given to Ginny and a metal ring a little bigger than a girl's bracelet was handed to Harry. «The Portkey you requested, M Potter.»

The woman looked them over for a moment, but her gaze returned to the young man. «Perhaps it is unfair of me to ask you this, but what are your feelings on the option to transfer schools. Will you be staying here or be going back to Hogwarts?»

Despite the calm way the Headmistress asked the question, Harry could tell she was very concerned about this by the way she was sitting - very tensely. He could understand why as she had gone to a lot of effort to get them here.

«It is an interesting possibility, but I think my first reaction is to stay here.» He noticed Hermione shifting in her seat slightly and his mother's advice about treating the girls well returned to him. «However, it is something the four of us would need to discuss.»

«Of course,» the Headmistress said smoothly, relaxing a little, «it is always a good idea to have agreement on large decisions. I have had nothing but good reports on all of you, including your class scores. I was slightly hesitant about giving you your own suite of rooms, but that has worked out well. I am pleased to hear from your chaperones that you do not isolate yourselves. Then there was this afternoon.»

She sighed heavily. «I have never had anything like that happen at this school before, yet what can be done about men who are insane?»

«The difference between Beauxbatons and Hogwarts is that you had a plan if something went wrong and you had adults who tried to protect us. There, we never had any help until after it didn't matter. Here, we had help in seconds.» Harry smiled at her. «You don't have

to make it perfect for us to stay here, your present efforts are good enough.»

«We appreciate all you do,» Hermione added and the other girls agreed.

A warm smile graced the Headmistress's face. «Thank you very much. Unless you have any other questions for me, I'll let you study for your exams tomorrow.»

They bid her good-bye and returned to their dorm room. In the privacy of their suite, Harry looked at the others. «Does anyone want to go to Hogwarts? I mean really want it enough to transfer, not just 'it'd be nice sometimes'?»

«No, I want to stay here,» Ginny said quickly. «There are times I wish we were there, but I don't think we'd have rooms like this there.»

«And we'd have to share our secrets with others there,» Gabrielle added.

Harry looked at Hermione.

«There are times,» she said slowly, obviously thinking it through, «but I think I have to agree with Ginny. I doubt we'd get to live together there and I've come to like this.»

«We're agreed then,» Harry said with finality and a grin. «Now for the next question.» They looked at him wondering what he was talking about and he pulled out Dumbledore's wand. Understanding, they gathered around it.

«It's a strange looking wand,» Harry said. «I went through a lot of wands at Olivander's and didn't see one quite this unusual.»

«Turn it, Harry,» Hermione told him. «I think there's a rune or

something near the end.» After Harry complied, she gasped and whispered, "It's the Deathstick."

All four of them stared at the Deathly Hallow's symbol on the wand for a long moment.

Harry swallowed nervously before switching languages and whispering too. "Not a word of this to anyone as my dad said people might try to kill us if they knew about it. If anyone asks, it's just a plain wand. I'll put it in our vault at home tomorrow night.»

The girls quickly agreed and Harry hid the wand in his room.

-0-

The next evening, the Portkey from the Headmistress dropped them in Diagon Alley.

"That's strange," Hermione commented. "I would have thought it would have taken us to the Ministry."

"Perhaps she told them it was so she could go shopping?" Ginny suggested with a teasing grin.

Harry shook his head at the amusing idea. "Hoods up and follow me." They all raised the hoods of their cloaks so they would not be identified as easily and went into the Leaky Cauldron, where Harry threw a few Knuts into the jar to pay for the Floo Powder and they Flooed home.

Dobby appeared and bowed. "Welcome home Master and Mistresses." He quickly collected their bags and cloaks. Foreman Remus is outside, Master."

"Thank you, Dobby. Ladies, shall we go see what Remus has been up to?" He led them to the front door and around the side of the

house.

"Are you finally going to tell us what those tasks you and Remus have been so secretive about?" Hermione asked with some exasperation.

"Hey, I'm allowed a few secrets for surprises. You know I'll tell you eventually," he said a little defensively, but mostly teasing.

"We know," Ginny said kindly, rolling her eyes at the older sister-wife. "We also know how much Hermione like to know things."

Hermione threw her a half-hearted glare, but did not contradict Ginny.

"I'm sure it'll be grand," Gabrielle said brightly.

"That's the spirit," Harry told her and put his arm around the girl's shoulder as he led them around the side of the house.

Before they had walked very far, Remus walked around the corner and stopped them. Drawing his wand, he conjured three blindfolds. "I believe you wanted to surprise them, Harry?"

"Right you are. Ladies please stand still for a moment." He grabbed a blindfold from Remus and started tying it on Gabrielle.

"Is this really necessary?" Hermione asked as Remus tied hers on.

"I think so," Harry said jovially as he finished Gabrielle's and started on Ginny's.

When the girls were all blindfolded, Harry and Remus slowly led them forward. As they rounded the corner of the house, Harry looked closely at the new additions. "That's look good. Did you have any trouble with them?"

"Not really. The illusion wards on the one were tricky to install but common enough I didn't have any trouble finding the information on it. The others tasks were simply physical work."

"Ooo, something stinks," Gabrielle said, scrunching up her nose cutely, or so Harry thought.

"Almost there," he told them. When they were inside, Remus closed the door behind them. "All right, you can take the blindfolds off."

The three girls whipped them off and stared.

"We have a barn now?" Hermione asked as she looked around the good sized structure.

"We do," Remus answered. "We need a place to work with the small herd of cattle we have."

"I see a saddle. Does that mean we have horses?" Ginny asked hopefully and Gabrielle looked eager as well, Hermione only slightly so.

Remus chuckled. "A horse is the easiest way to get around the property and look like a Muggle, although I have considered putting an illusion of a horse on a broom."

"How many do we have?" Gabrielle asked.

"Just two for now." At the girls' disappointed looks, he added hastily, "But they are a stud and a mare and I hope to have enough for all of you to ride together by the time Gabrielle finishes school and you live here full time. If not, we can buy what we need. I'll even teach you to ride; I learned recently and it's not too hard."

"This is great, Harry," Ginny told him, the other two agreed.

"I'm glad you like the idea. It's mostly so we can appear to be normal to the surrounding Muggles."

"I've been spending the occasional evening at the local pub and spreading the story you suggested," Remus said.

"What story is that, Harry?" Hermione asked, looking like this was something else he should have told her.

Sheepishly, he explained, "I asked Remus to get to know a few of the local people and let it be known that the place appeared empty because my parents were killed and that I'm just now starting to take over the family property. If you remember, I told you that Sirius said that some of the local people were starting to talk about our property and what had happened to it."

The girls nodded their understanding and Remus said, "Anyway, it's been going well and I've been accepted, or at least as well as I can be considering they don't know much about me and that I'm new."

"Splendid, Remus." Harry looked at the man with a growing grin. "How about surprise number two?"

"There's more?" Ginny asked, her eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Yes, and I think you'll like this one." Harry gestured to Remus who walked to a door on the other side and opened it.

Ginny stopped in the doorway and stared for half a second before she squealed with excitement and threw herself at Harry to hug him tightly then kiss him.

Gabrielle looked at Hermione with bewilderment before walking around Ginny and Harry. "Ooh, that looks like fun." Hermione could only gape at the full sized Quidditch pitch, without stands for

spectators.

"I assume this is what the illusions were for?" Hermione asked.

"Yes," Remus answered as Harry was still busy with Ginny, or perhaps Ginny was still busy thanking Harry. "It's the standard set of illusions for personal Quidditch pitches. Each of the sets of goals will look like trees, and within the pitch, flyers will look like birds."

"Birds that fly like madmen?" Hermione asked incredulously. "You have seen these two fly, right?"

Remus chuckled. "Yes, I remember my year at Hogwarts and Harry's games quite well." He shrugged. "I'm told it will look normal to Muggles, so perhaps it makes the birds look normal, but this is the standard set of wards approved by the Ministry."

"And we can fly in there. I like it," Gabrielle told him.

"Time for the last surprise?" Harry asked, surprising the three with his sudden reappearance.

"There's more?" Hermione asked, as surprised as Ginny had been last time. "How much money have you been spending, Harry?"

"Not all that much actually, or so Remus reported." Harry led them around the end of the barn and back towards the house. "We only had to buy the materials. Remus and Dobby have been doing all the work."

As the girls saw the house, Gabrielle asked, "What is that?"

"The Muggles call it a sunroom," Remus answered with a smile. "I've been enjoying it for the last week since it was finished. It's a nice place for a meal, as well as a place to relax in the evening."

"Wait!" Hermione exclaimed as she looked into the new glass room attached to the back of the house. "Is that a pool inside?"

"There is supposed to be one there somewhere," Harry said dryly. All the girls rushed forward to check it out and Harry turned to his foreman. "Not a word to anyone we're here this week, not even Sirius."

Remus sighed and nodded. "I haven't forgotten, although I don't understand why this visit is such a secret."

"We all like Sirius, Dan, and Emma, but we also want to enjoy some time as just us and no school either." They walked to the door of the new sunroom and Harry nodded as he looked at it all carefully, noting the waterfall from the hot tub that sat a few feet above the pool, and the short diving board on the other end. The white table and chairs near the door into the house were just as he had requested. "The plants are a nice touch."

"Thanks, I thought it gave the place a slight jungle feel instead of being so barren, as well as adding some color."

Harry nodded. "Enjoy it whenever you want, Remus. Unless the girls charm the windows black or something," he said with a wild grin, "and lock the door."

"I'm not a pervert," Remus protested, "I could guess that means they want privacy." After a moment he asked, "Would they really do that?"

Harry watched the girls checking out the various chairs to see how comfortable they were. "I would bet Gabrielle would do that." Ginny too he thought but did not say.

"I'll start on the greenhouse next week," Remus said, steering them back to safer conversational ground.

"That'll be good. I'll get Neville over to help this summer."

"They won't be here this week?" Remus asked.

"No," Harry replied. "Their break is next week."

All three additions were greatly enjoyed all week long and the only adult who was aware of their presence there was Remus Lupin.

Harry had lost count of the number of times this day he had had to abandon the search for the Golden Snitch and make a defensive play in this game. Their team generally benefitted when he did this, but it also dragged the game on for a longer time. Today, however, anything legal was required.

Their team had won the "B" division plus the first round of the play-offs, and today they were playing the winner of the "A" division for the championship. There had been no doubt that playing the Blue-A team was going to be very hard. It was well known that five of the seven players, all seventh years, wanted to play professionally and several professional scouts were in attendance.

Because the other team's Chasers were so good, Harry could not just fly in circles looking for the Snitch; he had to use every trick he saw at the Quidditch Championships in Britain last year and make defensive plays to break up the opposing Chasers' plays when he could just so his team even had a chance to stay close to the same score. The Blue-A team was spectacularly good and his team had been the only one this season who had given them a challenge and Harry was not sure his team would win. At the moment, the Blue-A team was winning 170-50.

Another swoop from Harry in front of the opposing Chasers slowed the attack just enough that the Red-B Chasers were able to get into a better defensive position with Ginny making a play for the Quaffle. A crack of a Beater Bat made Harry turn to see where it was going.

Luckily, it was not coming his way, but it was on a line directly for Camila and she was looking the other way.

«Camila! Turn!» he shouted at Philip's cousin and their lead Chaser. The girl managed to turn just enough that the Bludger caught only the edge of her uniform, but it had been close.

Harry quickly scanned the area for the Snitch but still saw nothing. Another crack of the bat sounded and this time Harry did not even have time to shout nor did Ginny have time to react before the Bludger hit her left shoulder from the back. Without consciously thinking about what he needed to do, Harry turned and raced towards her as the first wave of a pain indicator hit him, telling him Ginny was indeed hurt.

The world seemed to slow down to Harry as he urged his broom to go faster while Ginny let go of her broom and started to tumble off in slow motion towards the ground about forty feet below. Hoping he was calculating everything correctly, Harry angled down and held his hand out. More than he ever had before, he pushed his magic, not into his broom for more speed but into his hand willing Ginny to come to him.

Hermione stood up and gasped in shock when she saw Ginny knocked off her broom and Harry flying over to save her. Gabrielle bumped into her and she threw her arms around the girl as Gabrielle hugged Hermione for dear life. A feeling of weakness then came over both of them as Harry reached for Ginny and she seemed to break the laws of physics as her fall seemed to slow dramatically before Harry snatched her out of the air by leaning over his broom and grabbing the back of her uniform. It felt like their magic slammed back into them, leaving them weak in shock, as Harry took his broom down in little more than a controlled fall.

Ginny tried to let her legs take most of the shock as they hit the ground in a much slower and controlled way than she had expected

when the Bludger had hit her, but the multiple shocks of the hit with the blinding pain, being caught by Harry with the jolt sending more pain, and then hitting the ground had come so fast, she was not really able to control anything except for making sure her feet hit first. Crumpling to the ground and landing on her injured shoulder sent a new wave of agony through her causing her world to go black.

Harry had not meant to drop her as the ground came up to meet them, but he was falling off his broom from the extra weight and precarious position he had caught her in. Ginny's scream and then sudden silence made him scramble from where he had landed in a tumble over to her as she went limp. "We need a Healer!" he screamed as he looked her over, trying to determine what he needed to do.

In the background noise, Harry heard the referee's whistle blow, not that Harry cared at the moment. He only had eyes for Ginny and Healer Landri running towards them. Based on how close he was, Harry thought the healer must have started running towards the second Ginny had been hit and before she had even hit the ground.

«Don't move her!» the Healer yelled as he ran up to them. In one motion, he dropped his bag near Ginny and started the diagnostic charms.

The time for the charms and analysis was the longest few seconds of Harry's life.

«Good, no spinal or head damage.» Another wave of the man's wand and Ginny slowly floated up and shifted into a more normal position from her slightly twisted state. «She is in no danger M Potter. The injury is only in her left shoulder and that can be healed. Do not worry about her. I'll take good care of her on the sidelines until the game is over.»

«So she'll be fine?» Harry had to make sure. Even with Ginny

unconscious, he knew she still felt pain as he still felt that indication from her.

«Yes, she'll be as good as new in a few days. She'll be staying with me overnight though. Finish your game; I promise I'll take good care of her,» the Healer assured Harry as he slowly walked to the sidelines with Ginny floating with him.

He looked to the stands and saw Hermione and Gabrielle in what looked like death grip on each other. Doing his best to ignore his worry, he smiled nervously and waved at them. Relief flooded over them and they relaxed a little.

«I know it will be hard,» Harry heard his team captain say as his hand gripped Harry's shoulder and shook it a little in companionship, «but we have to finish the game. Giraud will come in and finish the game for her and then you can go see that she'll be fine.»

Harry nodded, although his mind was not on the reserve Chaser who was coming into the game. Bruno was right, he knew. He needed to get his head back in the game and finish it, then he could go to Ginny. Looking up at the scoreboard, he saw they were now down by 140 points.

Bruno slapped him on the shoulder again. «Yes, they scored again before the whistle blew as my mind was on Weasley too. I'm sorry I made it that much harder on you Potter, but it's up to you to end this. Do it fast.»

Knowing there was nothing else he could do, Harry nodded and walked over to his broom. He saw Ginny's a short distance away and went over to it and picked it up. Pulling out his wand, he shrank it and put it in an inner pocket to give to her later. Putting his wand away and mounting his broom, he rocketed into the air, determined to find the Snitch as soon as possible.

Five minutes after the whistle restarted the game, the Snitch smacked into Harry's palm and ended the game. A glance at the scoreboard showed that Blue-A had indeed taken advantage of Red-B's second best scorer being out of the game. Even with the points for the Snitch, Red-B had lost by forty points. Harry never wanted anyone to get injured, but Ginny's injury did not even help them to win - it was completely meaningless other than it hurt her dearly.

Harry slipped the Snitch into the pocket with Ginny's broom, wanting to keep it as a motivational reminder later, and flew over to his injured redhead. His brunette and blonde were already there and assisting as they could.

«Good catch,» Gabrielle told him as she hugged him.

Hermione hugged him too. «You played well.» When they released each other, she answered the obvious question. «It's still only her shoulder that's injured. However, because it was a direct hit to her shoulder blade and not a glancing blow, he's going to have to vanish the broken bone and give her Skel-Gro. She has a lot of bruising there too, so she's going to have to stay in the hospital overnight.»

«A good summary, Mlle Granger,» Healer Landri complimented her as he levitated a still unconscious Ginny - who was now on her stomach - and started to walk slowly back to the school building. «I have reduced most of the swelling and bruising, enough to be able to heal her shoulder. She should be able to leave my care by lunch tomorrow, but no Quidditch for at least two months to allow that shoulder to completely heal. She'll also need to avoid any blows to that shoulder for the same time. A light exercise program starting in a week would be good. In fact, her overall excellent physical shape helped her. I would expect her to be completely recovered by the end of the summer.»

«Thank you,» Harry told him. «I would like to stay with her tonight.

I've had Skel-Gro and know it's not very comfortable.»

The Healer eyed him for a moment. «There really is no need, M Potter. I will keep her unconscious until morning so she'll never feel any discomfort. I'm not sure who gave you Skel-Gro, but there is rarely any need to keep the patient awake with it. I always give a Dreamless Sleep potion when I have to regrow bones and there is no adverse interaction between the two potions. I would strongly prefer you to return to your room and get a good night's sleep. You may come visit first thing in the morning and stay with her until she leaves if you want to, but after your physical and emotional trials today, you need sleep almost as much as she does.»

Harry almost protested the slight against Madam Pomfrey to say she must have had a good reason when she had to regrow his arm, but he held back.

«She'll be asleep and you should be too, Harry,» Hermione said softly.

«Come with us until morning,» Gabrielle begged him.

Looking up at the Healer as they came to the doors of the building, Harry saw the Healer smile ever so slightly. «Please make it after seven, but feel free to sleep as late as you want. I don't believe she will be leaving before twelve.»

«Please take extra good care of her,» Harry begged.

Healer Landri looked at him kindly. «You have my word, M Potter. Go, get a good night's rest. Nurse Rolland will change her clothes and be near after I've worked on the injury and she's a very good nurse.» The healer floated Ginny towards the school's small hospital. Hermione and Gabrielle led Harry back to their rooms.

«Go take a shower, Harry,» Hermione told him. When he did not

immediately move because he was still thinking about Ginny, she glowered at him. «Harry, go take a shower or I'll come give you one.» When he started to grin at her, she added, «And I won't be gentle about it.» He lost his grin and started to move. «We'll be there shortly.»

When Harry came out of the bathroom in just his boxers, he was not surprised to find Hermione and Gabrielle already in his bed; he appreciated their desire to comfort him and wanted that. He was surprised to find they were both dressed in a short T-shirt and knickers only.

«I convinced Hermione that we should dress like Ginny normally does since it should be her night with you,» Gabrielle said with a bright smile. «I'll even take my top off for you if you like.»

That made Harry grin despite his tiredness and worry. Pulling the growing girl with budding breasts into his arms for a hug, he told her, «Ginny doesn't take her top off and it's not time for you to do that either.»

«You can hold them if you like. Ginny told me it feels good,» she tried again to advance their physical relationship.

Harry could only chuckle and glance at Hermione, who was rolling her eyes at the girl's antics. «That's good to know, but I'm afraid you'll have to settle for me just holding you close.»

Letting go of Gabrielle, he turned to Hermione and pulled her in for a good hug, feeling her breasts push against his chest. He wished she did not have her T-shirt on, but with Gabrielle here, modesty was a necessity lest the young Veela take the older girl's nudity as an invitation to do the same.

In bed, while Gabrielle did her best to snuggle into him and make him think of her, Harry could not help but check on Ginny through their

bond. Feeling her pain to be almost gone made him feel better than the two skimpily dressed witches with him. He pulled Gabrielle to him tightly, but it was not the same as holding Ginny.

-0-

The next morning, Harry woke early and went to the hospital wing as soon as he could. Healer Landri looked fresh and he smiled at Harry as he walked in. «Her shoulder is normal again as far as her bones, tendons, and ligaments; but there is still some swelling and bruising left although it will be gone by the end of the day. Nurse Rolland said she had an easy night, so she should be waking soon. I'll be back in a few hours for another check before I release her, but you should be able to take her to lunch. In the meantime, please tell her to stay on her stomach and call me if she needs to get up for the bathroom.»

«Thank you, Healer Landri.»

«Anytime, however, if all of you would quit playing Quidditch then I'd have less to do,» the man said in a friendly way.

«And you'd have less fun on Saturdays,» Harry teased back, as the man's fondness for Quidditch was well known throughout the school.

Landri chuckled and clapped Harry on the shoulder before going to his office.

Hermione and Gabrielle showed up a few minutes later, since it took them a little longer to get ready. Harry gave them the news and they talked quietly.

Ginny woke nearly an hour later and Harry gave her the news on her injury. Very slowly, she tested the shoulder. «It's sore and stiff, but doesn't really hurt beyond a dull ache.» She turned a little red, but told him quietly, "Thank you for catching me, Harry. I'll reward you when we go home in a few weeks."

It was not hard to guess at what she was implying. Gabrielle's increased interest in the conversation did not help. "You don't need to do anything special. I would have done it for all of you and I just happened to be in the right place at the right time."

She was not to be deterred though. "I ordered a new sleeping outfit for a special occasion. Don't you want to see it?" she asked him coyly, batting her lashes at him as best she could considering her position and inability to face him fully.

Harry closed his eyes for a moment and swallowed. All three of them, and Hermione was the surprise he thought, liked to buy something new to wear once or twice a month. They would owl order it with Hedwig and then show it off to him. Everything they bought with the spending money he gave them looked good on them, but Ginny tended to push the boundaries the most.

From his way of thinking, Hermione probably felt like she did not need to as much as she and Harry were the most physical. Gabrielle really could not push too much as Hermione, Ginny, and Harry would not let her. But Ginny was old enough and far enough along on "their schedule", that she could push some and get away with it. Also, Ginny had been "pushing" for years at home, so it was natural for her to do so ... or that's how he thought about it all.

"Let's just get you well and moving around normally. I'm sure everything will be fine," he dodged as best he could. Ginny only nodded, but she had a satisfied and mischievous smile he noticed, and that worried him slightly as to what she might try.

-0-

Three weeks later, the three oldest had finished their OWLs and felt reasonably good about their performance on the difficult tests. Gabrielle had finished her "second" year and had scored Exceeds

Expectations on all of her courses, except for Charms and Defense where she scored Outstanding - thanks to help from Harry, and an Acceptable in Astronomy because she did not like the subject very much.

Via the Floo, they returned to Delacour Chateau for a week before they were to return to Britain.

Harry breathed a sigh of contentment when they arrived home for the summer. He or one of the girls would have to play taxi driver for Dan and Emma, who had agreed to stay at Potter Manor over the summer, when they were there - just as they had over the Christmas holidays.

"Remus!" Harry called out when he saw the man walk in through the back door. "How's everything going?"

"Very well, actually. Is now a good time for us to talk?"

"Sure. The girls are upstairs putting their things away. Did you have any place special in mind?" Harry asked.

"Let's take a tour then." Remus led him out the back door and towards the barn. "Do you remember the riding lessons I gave you?"

"I think so, but I guess we'll find out." Harry grinned at him.

Remus chuckled. "I guess we will." Two horses were already saddled, since Remus was expecting him. A few minutes later they were riding out the door, Harry a little stiffly and Remus much more comfortably.

"I'll show you the records when we get back later, but overall the ranch is doing well considering we've only just started." Remus pointed towards the cattle in front of them. "As you can see, it's only a small herd, but it's a good start. I hope to have twice that many two years from now and we'll start selling the year after that. I also have a section of land that's growing hay for the winter. My goal is to have it

all profitable in three or four years."

Harry nodded as he took all of that in and compared it to his own goals and plans. "I'm impressed, Remus; you've done a very good job. I think I may have to give you a bonus."

Remus shook his head and looked elsewhere for a moment. "Harry, you don't have to. This is the best place I've ever lived for more than a few days and you've given me a stable job."

"This is better than living at Hogwarts?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Honestly, yes. I don't have any real responsibility over rebellious teenagers here," the man said with a smile. "I'm also not on-call every hour of every day and I don't have to deal with Snape."

Harry laughed as they continued to gallop across the large field and toward what looked like a small house in the distance. "No, you don't have to worry about us or him. How are you doing?"

"Fine," Remus said without hesitation. "Like I said, I've got a good place to stay without anyone coming after me, I see Sirius from time to time, I go to the local pub - which you're going to have to come to sometime to meet everyone - I have some spending money to buy any important potions I might need, I generally get to do whatever I want when the ranch doesn't need me, and I've got a safe place to go once a month. There's not much more I could ask for. My supervisor is even a decent guy," he said with a wry grin.

"Suck up," Harry teased back at him, although he was thinking about what Remus had said, or rather what he had not said. "What about a girl in your life?" he asked, genuinely curious.

Remus gave him a surprised look. "Just because you've got three doesn't mean that I need one."

"Oh," Harry said with sudden realization, "sorry about that, I didn't realize you swung the other way. So, is there a special guy?"

"What?! No, just no, Harry," Remus said forcefully and scowled at Harry. "I know some like that and that's fine for them, but it's only girls for me." At Harry's dubious look, he added, "I just haven't found one for me, especially one that will put up with my ... condition." The last word was said a little defensively, despite it not being a secret.

"Then why don't you go find one?"

"You don't know how hard that is."

"I guess I don't, but what I do know is that if I were you I'd start looking for a female werewolf as she'd understand," Harry said with a pointed look.

Remus looked away in embarrassment. "I suppose that is an option I hadn't fully considered, but I'd prefer not to inflict myself on anyone."

"Look, there must be a female werewolf out there that's decent like you are. Find her and see if you can make a go at it. If it becomes serious, let me know and I'll add her to the wards. I'd expect you to vouch for her and make sure that she doesn't put anyone in danger, but otherwise, I can't think of any reason for you not to have a significant other, Remus. You know, someone to really share your life with." Harry watched him consider that and found it amusing that this seemed to be a new line of thought for the man. Harry wondered if the man was simply trying to ignore all reminders that he was a werewolf.

After a long moment, Remus said, "Thanks, I'll think about it and, well, there are a couple of them that I know..."

"I see, trying to equal what I have, huh?" Harry said, doing his best to keep a straight face.

"What? No, no, no. I meant that-"

Harry burst out laughing unable to hold it any longer.

"You're as bad as Sirius at times," Remus murmured, but he made sure Harry could hear him.

Trying to change the subject Remus quickly said, "I hope you don't mind, but I built a small house here at the edge of the property." He pointed to the small ranch house not too far ahead. "As you'll feel in a moment, we're about to leave the wards on the main property. I think your ancestors fashioned the wards to deal with local Muggles in this way and I've done the same thing so they'll come here instead of the main house.

"This is the ranch office and it's got a telephone and a box for the post. I've also set up a few wards for protection and as an alarm. There's also one to listen for the phone and let me know if it goes off; however, there's not enough magic to prevent Muggle devices from working," Remus explained.

They got off their horses and let them graze on some grass while Harry inspected it. "Not much here," he said when they were inside, indicating the desk, phone, answering machine, and light - that was all. "I suppose it makes us look more normal?"

"Yes. About half of the larger ranches in the area have something like this." Remus pointed to the two doorways behind him. "There's a bathroom and another small room, so someone could stay here if they had to."

"Good job, Remus, really good job." Harry was very pleased with the family friend and that Sirius's suggestion had worked out so well.

As they neared the house on their return trip, Harry spied Ginny

flying on the Quidditch Pitch. Hermione and Gabrielle were sitting in chairs at the side. He also noticed that his broom was there too, brought by Ginny he was sure. He gave his horse to Remus and bid the man good-bye for the moment as he headed for his broom.

-0-

Dan and Emma had joined them that evening, but were now in their bedroom. Everyone had generally settled down for the night.

Harry was waiting on Ginny, as it was her turn to join him, but he was not sure what was taking her so long. His bedroom door finally opened and she walked in wearing her night gown, pulled tight but showing bare calves - as usual since she normally slept in a short T-shirt and knickers which showed a small strip of her stomach. She locked his door with the knob, then pulled out her wand and sealed it, both physically and for sound.

To say that Harry was surprised at that was an understatement. Not even Hermione did that and they were adventurous at times.

She walked over and put her wand on the nightstand and then stood near the bed looking slightly hesitant, or perhaps as if she were gathering her courage. Just before Harry was about to ask her what was going on, Ginny tugged at her gown tie and then shrugged the gown off and let it fall all in one quick motion.

He forgot to breath and his eyes went wide as he took her form in. She stood here in a new lingerie outfit that was a sheer light green and completely see-through except for two little hearts up top and a small green triangle on the bottom that was held up with what looked like a string. She smiled a little nervously before turning around slowly. The back of the top was completely sheer and like the front stopped several inches above where the bottom should be, except that there was no back to the bottoms. As she completed the turn, he realized that the back consisted of two strings: one horizontal and

one vertical.

"Harry?" Ginny softly called.

A shiver and a sudden breath brought him back to reality. "G-Gin? W-What are..." He could not finish the sentence as his mind was still taking the sight of her in.

With a smile of satisfaction, Ginny said, "I told you I would reward you for saving me ... again. Do you like my outfit?"

He could only nod, afraid to try talking again after his somewhat failed attempt.

Ginny seemed to glide forward before she crawled up on the bed and sat on Harry, pinning him down - not that he really wanted to be anywhere else right now. He had seen Hermione completely naked before, but he had never seen this much of Ginny. She technically had all the private parts covered, but it was a close thing. Now that his brain was starting to work again, he realized just what she was offering him.

"This is twice now." She tilted her head slightly in a shrug, causing her loose hair to sway. "The second time wasn't as dramatic, but it's no less important. I have no doubt what would have happened if I'd fallen from that height as I was in no condition to try to save myself. So, whatever you want, it's yours." She gave him a contented smile, sort of Mona Lisa like.

Harry did his best to look at her face and not at the other very interesting parts of her that he could see if he tried, lest his brain freeze up again. As he was about to ask her why this reward, the answer suddenly hit him, or he was almost certain this was the answer.

While Gabi might do something like this, it would be for entirely

different reasons. Ginny saw an actual debt between them and because of how she was raised, she felt she had to do something. She might despise or even hate her mother, but she was an English Pureblood girl and had been raised in that culture with all of its traditions and beliefs.

Sirius had tried to explain much of it to him, including one time when it was just to two of them, and the topic of marriage had come up. Not only had Sirius explained about the marriage ceremony, but how Wizarding marriages actually worked on a day-to-day basis - the relationship between husband and wife. His godfather had been very clear that unless the marriage was between unusual people, the wife might try to persuade her husband to do things a different way - usually in her way - but when push came to shove she would let her husband make the final decision. Furthermore, a good wife in a British Pureblood marriage rarely if ever contradicted her husband in public; the most she would normally do would be to whisper advice in his ear for him alone to hear. (In private she would be more vocal until he made up his mind.) It was a large part of why their society was so male-dominated.

There was no doubt in his mind that Ginny would never spout all the Pureblood drivel that someone like a Malfoy would, but Ginny still came from a British Wizarding home and was raised in those traditions. Hence why Ginny was literally offering him everything, yet sat there patiently waiting on him to decide what would happen. Of course, she might also think that Hermione should have "this honor" first and was giving Harry the chance to say so.

All of those thoughts zoomed through his head in a few seconds as did an idea of what might be best, despite what his body wanted at the moment.

"Ginny, I can hardly believe you're offering me such an incredible gift," he watched her smile grow a little, "but we also promised to wait."

"And it is up to you," she softly reminded him and leaned over to kiss him gently, letting her top fall down a little, giving him a complete view of her breasts for a moment before she sat back up and looked at him completely innocently, batting her big brown eyes slowly.

"That's not fair, you're too beautiful," he murmured, causing her to brighten.

"You really think I'm beautiful? That I'm not too ... small?" she asked hopefully.

Why did every girl doubt her looks, he asked himself. Making a decision that he hoped he did not regret later, he asked her, "If we do something a little early, do you promise to lie like a Slytherin that it never happened, even if Gabrielle tries to make you admit it?"

She smiled ever so slightly. "Of course nothing happened, Harry. You're too noble and stubborn."

Ginny looked so innocent and sweet he would have believed anything she told him at that moment. He was also sure that if any pranks ever happened around the house, she should be the one he should suspect first. "And your knickers and my boxers will stay on tonight, no matter what we might feel like?"

Her smile faded slightly. "If you insist." A few seconds later her eyebrows shot up and her smile returned. "You didn't say anything about my top."

"Your birthday is in about six weeks," he reminded her.

With no hesitation, she grabbed her top and pulled it off, tossing it to the floor before looking at him expectantly.

"Never worry, Gin," he told her sincerely, "you'll always be beautiful to

me. I thought you were before and this just confirms it."

Ginny practically flung herself at Harry and kissed him soundly. It was a good thing they had nothing to do first thing the next morning as they stayed up late that night exploring a new aspect of their relationship.

A few days later, Sirius showed up as he had promised when Harry had contacted him. They met in the entry way: the four Potters, Sirius, Remus, Emma, and Dan.

"I'd rather stay here," Gabrielle said with a cute pout.

"I know," Harry said with care as he put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her in for a tight hug. "However, your magic isn't really mature enough to learn this and I'd rather you not try and then hurt yourself."

"But I've already done it once," she protested.

"And I'm glad you did and that you didn't get hurt, but I still think you need to wait a couple of years. Now, Emma said she'd take you shopping and I know you like to do that. So you can enjoy yourself that way for a few hours."

Gabrielle pulled back and scrutinized him carefully. "You'll spend time with just me later? Kisses too?"

"Yes," he said with a smile, "kisses just like on your birthday."

"In the hot tub?" she continued.

"Fine, in the hot tub. You can tell me about your shopping and what else you'd like to do this summer."

She kept looking at him and after a long moment said, "All right, I

better get a new swimsuit then."

"You already have several," Harry pointed out.

"But not one just for you." Her mind made up, she pulled out the family Portkey that Harry had given her and held it out for the Grangers, who had been watching the conversation with amusement.

"Emma," Harry called just before they could go. "Please be a good mother in regards to the choices?" Gabrielle scowled at him for that.

"Of course, but there is some opportunity for fun at your expense here," she said with a smile as she touched the Portkey and Gabrielle activated it, taking her, Dan, and Gabrielle away.

Harry hoped Emma was just teasing him, and she probably was. If Gabrielle came back with a swimsuit like Ginny's lingerie, he was sure he would have to disappoint her. In three or four years it would be fine, but he was not ready for that now.

"Now that it's just us, let's learn to Apparate," Sirius announced as he walked them outside so he and Remus could teach the three older teens as he had promised last year.

-0-

That evening Harry saw Gabrielle's new swimsuit. He was not surprised to see that it was a two piece. He was very happy that Emma had made sure the silver suit was proper. It reminded him of Fleur's suit during the second task of the Triwizard Tournament, and when he rescued Gabrielle and created their bond. He would not be surprised if she had planned the color for that very reason. If asked, he would have to admit that the way Gabrielle looked in her new suit left no doubt that she was a girl.

"Do you like it?" Gabrielle asked, twirling as she walked across the pool area towards Harry.

"I do. It was a good choice for you. It brings out the silver in your hair."

She grabbed the end of her hair and pulled it towards the front of the suit so she could compare. "Hmm, you're right." Dropping her hair, she grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the hot tub.

Harry chuckled as it was fairly clear to him that she had already known that about her suit. The four of them had spent the evening before last sitting in the hot tub together and it had been a hit. He had no doubt they would be spending a lot of time there in the future.

Gabrielle sat on his lap after he sat down in the tub. "Did you get it to work? Can you Apparate now?" she asked, not wasting any time on idle chatter.

"Mostly." At her questioning look, he gave her more details. "Ginny was the first, in that she managed to blink in place. Once I realized she was borrowing power from me, and that we all tended to do that and overpower our first attempt at harder spells, I borrowed magic and Apparated a few feet."

"I felt you borrow magic, but I knew you were not hurt," she told him, obviously proud at his accomplishment.

"Once I did that, Hermione tried next and also managed it. Ginny was also successful and surprised Remus and Sirius. All of us found it harder than we had expected. So we can do short distances where we can see the destination. We'll try longer distances soon."

"I still think I could do it too," she told him pointedly.

"Perhaps, but there's no hurry as one of us is always around to help

you go somewhere." When she looked like she was about to argue, Harry kissed her cheek. That surprised her so much her argument was lost. With a teasing grin, Harry continued to kiss her like he had on her birthday and Gabrielle was soon like putty in his hands and practically purring.

Long after their skin was wrinkly, Harry carried a very content Gabrielle out to one of the lounge chairs and sat with her cuddled on him. They softly talked for an hour until it was time for dinner.

Harry laughed at Neville's story. "The twins really put a swamp in the Prefect's bathroom so no one could go in there?"

"I promise," Neville told him with a grin of his own as he helped Harry in the Potter's new greenhouse.

"So what did Sprout do about it?" Harry asked, still trying to regain his breath after laughing so hard.

"She and McGonagall teamed up and marched them back to the bathroom and forced them in and locked the door, after telling them that they couldn't come out until it was totally clean." Neville chuckled again. "Since it was after dinner and they were slow about it, everyone went to bed and they didn't get out until the next morning, but it was spotless. They also started receiving more orders for their prank shop."

Harry shook his head at the twins' antics as he watered the seeds he had just planted. "I wish I could have seen that." Putting his watering can down, he looked at his friend again. "Since we seem to be done, want to come to the house and go for a swim? It's a great way to cool off."

"I, uh, I didn't bring a suit," Neville stammered.

"That's OK, you can borrow one of mine. Come on..." Harry led

Neville in and soon they were back out at the pool.

Not long after they had jumped in, the three girls came out in their suits too, all in modest bikinis. Harry laughed at his friend as Neville turn bright red.

"Honestly, Neville," Hermione said as she put a large towel on a lounge chair to relax, "there's nothing to be embarrassed about. There's nothing wrong here and you'd see a lot more on the beach."

"I, I've never been to the b-beach," he finally got out.

"Really?" Harry asked in surprise. "Even I've been once. We'll have to invite you next time we all go."

Neville could only nod at the moment.

By the time Neville left that day, he was only a little pink when he thought of his time at the pool and it was not from the sun.

Summer continued with a week-long holiday to Spain, where they stayed with Philip's family. Philip and his father, along with Camila, acted as tour guides and made sure they saw the famous sites, Muggle and magical, and just generally had fun.

The day after Harry's sixteenth birthday party, everyone who had been invited and stayed overnight left for home. The four Delacours returned to France, Sirius to his house, Neville and Luna to their houses, and the Grangers left for a four-day dental convention.

Harry had a short conversation with Remus, the only one left behind, and the default chaperone in Dan's and Emma's minds. "Remus, I know this will be a surprise to you, but Hermione and I are going to take a short trip to Paris for the next few days. If an emergency comes up, Ginny will know how to get ahold of us."

Remus stared at him thoughtfully for a moment. "You picked this time because Dan and Emma aren't here, didn't you?"

"It worked out conveniently," Harry said with a grin, "but we would have gone before school restarted anyway. This way, what they don't know can't hurt them." Harry looked at the man pointedly.

"Yes, yes," Remus said with resignation, "I get the message: Don't tell anyone you're away. However, exactly what are you going to be doing and why just the two of you?" He gave Harry a smirk of his own.

Not blushing at all, Harry replied, "Hermione discovered some property that the Potters own near Paris, or probably on the edge of it, and we're going to investigate it."

"And the fact that it's just you and her?" Remus slightly teased him.

"That will make us look more normal, as will a glamor to make us look five year older. There will be other times that I'll go out with just one of the girls because having three girls on my arm would look very strange. This is one of those times." To change the subject, he then said, "We'll see you again on Friday. I don't think Ginny or Gabrielle will need help with anything since they promised to stay here on the property, but please look out for them anyway."

"Of course," Remus said before a large grin broke, "and enjoy yourselves."

"Thanks, Remus, we plan to enjoy our little holiday." Harry left to go get Hermione, knowing that Remus was not fooled in any way.

-0-

Late Friday morning, Harry was packing his bag to return home, as was Hermione. Besides the things he had brought with him, he was

also taking a few souvenirs for Ginny and Gabrielle, as well as a large grin that was hard to get off his face.

As Remus had guessed, he and Hermione had come here to have some alone time now that both of them were sixteen. It was a year earlier than their original schedule, but they had both decided that they were ready for the last step of intimacy and it had been a wonderful, splendid, and a totally brilliant thing. He thought he knew what he would be doing every Monday and Thursday night for the foreseeable future. Hermione seemed just as enthusiastic when he had mentioned it to her.

Harry watched Hermione bend over to finish packing, enjoying the sight. "Don't take too long, we need to return before you parents if we want to avoid a lot of questions."

She turned slightly and smiled at him. "For once, I don't think I care, Harry."

"Shocking," he gasped playfully, causing her to stick her tongue out at him. "Careful, I might have to do something with that."

She closed her bag and then walked over and kissed him deeply. "You mean like that?"

"Witch," he joked as he let go of her and grabbed their bags. "Anytime you're ready."

She held out the Portkey they had purchased to return to England and they traveled to their home country. From there, they Apparated back to their front door step.

Dobby greeted them and took their bags when they entered. He also looked upset. "Master Harry, the Grangers be wanting to talk to you in the Living Room."

Harry looked at Hermione, both of them surprised. "When did they return, Dobby?"

"Last night," Dobby answered. "They did not like their trip and came home early. They surprised Mistress Ginny, Mistress Gabi, and friend Luna. Godfather Sirius brought them over. He laughed when he found you and Mistress not here."

Before more could be said, Ginny and Gabrielle ran into the room and gave the other two hugs; Dobby left with the bags.

"Dan and Emma are here," Ginny said softly.

"I know, Dobby just told us," Harry said.

"They're not happy with you either," Gabrielle told them a little crossly.

"It's all right, Gabi," Harry told her, "don't be upset with them. It will all work out fine. Shall we get this over with?" To Hermione he added, "Be normal." She looked a little embarrassed, but shook it off quickly and held her head high.

He led them to the living room to find the Grangers each reading the newspaper.

"Hi, how are you and how did your convention go?" he asked as they entered the room, standing just inside the door.

The Grangers presented a united front by folding their newspapers and giving disapproving looks together.

"Harry, Hermione," Dan said formally and with a nod of greeting. "We're fine, thank you, and the convention was boring so we came home a day early. We were very surprised to find that you were not only not here but out of the country."

"We're sorry to hear your trip didn't go well," Harry continued for his side. "Hermione discovered a Potter property that we wanted to check out, perhaps to use it to live in after we finished Beauxbatons and needed to stay in the area while Gabrielle finished. However, we found it was just a tract of land and not in an area that we liked, so I arranged for it to be sold." There really had been a property; he had not made that up for Remus's or anyone else's sake.

"I see." Dan looked taken aback, obvious expecting some flimsier made-up story. He turned to his wife.

"You really picked now to go see it?" Emma asked. "And with just you and Hermione?"

"I thought now would interfere less with Beauxbatons and Hermione knows the most about the non-magical world." Harry shrugged. "It's not like I don't have the money and selling this property will give me many times more than we spent on the trip."

Emma looked right at Hermione. "You, both of you," she glanced at Harry too, "promised to wait until you're seventeen for that kind of behavior. Getting pregnant at sixteen is a good way to wreck your life."

When Hermione started to reply, and Harry could tell it would be hotly, he squeezed her hand to stop her. "Let's sit down and I'll point a few things out and then you can add in what I forget. Hmm?" She nodded once quickly as she worked to contain herself and Harry led the four of them to the largest sofa.

"Emma, Dan," Harry said as calmly as he could, "we both appreciate you looking out for us and helping us to grow up. It's why we want you in our lives beyond the fact that you are family."

Dan and Emma looked at each other a little guiltily, but did not say

anything.

"Yes, I'll admit that a year and a half ago we said we would wait until we got legally married." Harry shrugged. "We've changed our minds because we're magically married and we think we're emotionally ready." When they looked to object, Harry hurried on. "Also, we're very careful that Hermione won't get pregnant and even if she did, it wouldn't change anything. She could still finish school, we have a house that's completely paid for," he waved his hand to indicate where they were sitting, "and I have enough money that we won't ever have to work if we don't want to. We will work because we don't want to get bored, but we're financially comfortable. We would not have the hardship that most young people would."

"Also, we could get legally married right now, if we wanted to," Hermione told them, "in Scotland and in Spain when we visited it this summer, as well as other countries I'm sure. We've decided to wait on that part to make it easier on us."

Emma leaned back in her chair and rubbed her right temple. "I think this is another of those days that I wish I'd never heard of magic." Dan nodded sympathetically.

"We still love you and want you in our lives," Hermione said and Harry agreed emphatically, "but this is something we want to do and it seems right for us."

Dan sighed. "At least I know you'll be together fifty years from now. I don't think many other parents of teenagers can say that."

Harry smiled at Hermione who smiled back, the battle won.

(A/N: And so ends Harry's 5th year. One more chapter ... I promise the next one is the last. If all goes well, it'll be out in 2-3 weeks.

Also, in 1996, it was legal to get married in Scotland at 16 without

parental consent, or so someone from Scotland has told me. In Spain, the law was 18 for men and 14 for women; I adjusted the male side down a couple of years for the Magical World via Author's License. While I can't personally go there mentally, I do recognize that "the law" and I don't always see the world in the same way, but it's still the law of the land.)

Chapter 32 - Epilogue, Part 1

(Oct 1996)

October 10th happened to fall on a Thursday, one of Gabrielle's normal nights with Harry. That morning, she greeted Harry at their early morning exercise time with a kiss and it was not one of her "normal" ones. Instead, she jumped up on Harry, wrapped her legs around his waist, and did her best to actually snog him - taking Hermione and Ginny back by the Veela's forwardness.

Eventually, Harry pulled back. "Gabrielle, I need to breathe."

"That's what noses are for, silly!" she told him with a big grin and a light giggle.

He couldn't help but chuckle at her happy mood. "And Happy Birthday to you!"

"Thank you!" She proceeded to kiss him again.

After Harry disengaged himself again, he put her down on the floor. "It's time to exercise ... more kisses later."

"Yes, many more later. I have almost two years of kisses to make up," she informed him imperiously.

Harry and the other two girls laughed and then started their exercises for the morning, as they all continued to do at least twice a week together. Ginny tried to do it at least four or five times a week.

Harry could not help but watch Gabrielle and compare her to the others. While she was thirteen today, he thought she looked like a fourth year, or fourteen. He could not help but notice that Ginny's concern from last year was coming true; Gabrielle had breasts almost the size of Ginny's now, not that he thought she should have

or wanted her to have large breasts. He would be fine with however the girls turned out.

Throughout the day, whenever Gabrielle could get Harry alone, she kissed him as much as she could. Harry had been expecting it as she had hinted often that she would do this. Still, he found it amusing and did his best to bear "the burden". Actually, he thought it was "good to be him".

That evening, as soon as possible after homework, Gabrielle told her friends good night and dragged Harry to their rooms, leaving giggling girls behind. During their normal hour of alone time, Gabrielle said very little, still spending a lot of time kissing Harry.

He finally pulled her back. "I'm glad you're enjoying this, but we can't do this all the time."

"Today we can," she corrected him. "It's my birthday."

"And tomorrow?" he asked.

She looked at him wistfully. "You're right, I can't do this as much for the next hundred years. Starting tomorrow, I'll act more like Ginny."

"Oh? Why Ginny and not Hermione?" He was totally lost on this one.

"Because Ginny kisses you more; I've noticed."

Harry chuckled as he considered that Gabrielle was probably correct.

"But until then..." She kissed him again.

That night, Gabrielle slept with Harry all alone for the first time and she thought it wonderful.

(May 1997)

Harry caught the Golden Snitch and felt like he was going to explode in happiness. This year, they were the Red-A team, and other than Bruno and Russo leaving, their team was intact from last year. They had found a good Keeper and Beater as replacements and swept through the round-robin play much like Blue-A had last year. The championships had not even been all that hard.

After a bit of celebrating on the field as a team, he was a little surprised to be approached by two men. It was obvious from their glares at each other that they were not together. Another man and a woman were approaching Ginny as well. He moved to within a step of Ginny in case he had to protect her from these visitors to the game, because they were obviously not from the school.

"M Potter!" they both shouted as they came near, as the others shouted "Mlle Weasley!"

"M Potter, I want to talk to you about playing professional Quidditch," said the one on the left, just before the other said the same thing, and the other two said to Ginny. He relaxed a little as he realized what this was about.

"Gentlemen, thank you for the compliment that you think I'm that good, but I'm only about to finish sixth year."

Ginny must have been listening as she said almost the same thing to her visitors.

"Yes, we know, M Potter, but I would like you to come visit our team and to talk to us about playing after you finish school next year. I like the potential I see in you," the one on the right said, and the other nodded and added, "I too would like you to come visit soon."

Ginny pulled on his sleeve. "What do we do?" she asked softly.

"This is very sudden for us," Harry addressed the four visitors. "Please leave us a way to contact you and we will soon, but I don't think we can agree to anything right now. We need to think about this."

"What is there to think about?" the woman asked. "This is professional Quidditch!"

Harry and Ginny chuckled. "Yes it is, but it is still sudden for us. I can promise that we won't decide anything now, but I can also promise we'll contact you before the end of the summer."

The four grumbled a little, but they eventually handed over contact information and went to other players to talk.

As the visitors left, Hermione and Gabrielle came over and gave them a hug. Letting go, they noticed more visitors, ones they were happy to see.

"Sirius!" Harry greeted his godfather happily, while Ginny started greeting the Delacours and then Dan and Emma.

"Did you see the whole game?" Harry asked as he hugged Dan.

"We did. Emma and I were thrill and scared for both of you at the same time. We're also very happy that you won," Emma said with admiration.

"We're glad you're here, but what caused you to come?" Ginny asked.

"Sirius thought it would be fun for us and Headmistress Maxime invited us at about the time we were going to ask. She thought we'd like to see you as she thought your team would win." Dan clapped him on the shoulder with a look of pride. "I'm glad we came."

"We are too. Come on," Harry told them as he started to lead them towards the school. "You can see the school and our dorms and join our party for a while."

"The Headmistress already gave us a short tour of the school, but we would like to see your rooms," Emma told them.

By the time Sirius, Dan, and Emma left, they understood why the bond-mates wanted to live together at home - they had their own home at school. All in all, the Grangers were far happier with Beauxbatons than with Hogwarts.

Sirius told Harry he had a surprise for him, but it would have to wait until they arrived for the summer.

(Jul 1997)

The bond-mates started their summer with a week at the Delacours and a promise to spend the last half of August there. Back in Britain, they resumed their usual summer arrangement by staying at Potter Manor and having the Grangers stay as well.

Unlike most summers, there would be no summer holiday trip. That money was being used for Hermione's wedding on August 2nd. Dan and Emma thought the young couple should wait, but ultimately, it was not up to them as to when. Hermione had it all planned and most items were already taken care of. They were having a small wedding so it was not too hard to arrange the details by owl and Hedwig was happy to help.

Their third day back, Sirius invited them over for dinner. Harry assumed Sirius would tell them his surprise now.

The four used the Floo Network to travel to Sirius's house. As the last girl arrived, Sirius walked into the room with a woman on his arm. She was only a little shorter than Sirius, had golden blonde hair, and

carried herself well; she also greeted them with a smile.

"I'm glad you're here," Sirius told him as the bond-mates straightened their clothes after traveling. "I'd like to introduce you to Sophie Miller ... my fiancée."

The girls all squealed softly and smiled. Harry was happy that his godfather had finally found someone. "We're all very pleased to meet you and surprised that Sirius found someone that would put up with him," he said cheekily.

Sirius made a face at him, but Sophie laughed lightly, as did his girls.

"I can see why you think so highly of him," Sophie said with amusement before she looked expectantly at Sirius.

"Of course, my godson, Harry and his betrothed: Hermione, Ginny, and Gabrielle," Sirius said, indicating each in turn. Harry responded with a bow and kissed the back of her hand, while the girls all curtsied.

"Where did Sirius meet you?" Harry asked, wanting to know how well they fit together.

"Perhaps we should sit?" Sirius suggested and led them to the formal living room, where tea was waiting.

"I've known Sirius since Hogwarts," Sophie told them as Sirius handed out the drinks. "I was three years behind him at Hogwarts and in Hufflepuff. He dated a few of my older friends, but not me. So I'm very aware of his antics," she said with a mischievous look at Sirius, who returned the look with pride at being a Marauder. "We were reacquainted at a Christmas party this last year and we've spent a lot of time together since then."

"Why didn't you tell us you were serious about someone?" Harry

asked his godfather accusingly.

"Harry, I'm Sirius about everyone." He held the innocent look for a second before he broke into a grin.

"Sophie, can you fix him so he doesn't do that anymore?" Ginny asked sweetly.

Sophie laughed. "Probably not, but perhaps I can get him to tone it down - a little." She gave Sirius a loving smile, who returned it for a moment before looking back at Harry.

His expression darkened for a moment and he sighed. "I didn't tell you, or many people really, because I wasn't sure if anyone would have me."

"Sirius!" all four bond-mates exclaimed; Sophie did not look too pleased at that statement either.

He held up his hand. "I know what you're trying to say and I appreciate it, but Azkaban changed me and many people's perception of me." He gazed at Sophie for a moment. "She helped to heal the rest of me, or the rest than can be healed. Also," he turned back to them and his normal playful expression returned, "I had to consider that introducing someone to you would bring its own set of problems and I wanted to delay that as long as possible until everything was certain."

Harry understood immediately. "Well, she seems to have passed the first test." At Sophie's questioning look, he answered, "You're treating me like normal and I don't think Sirius would have introduced us if you hadn't when you first found out he was my godfather."

She nodded in understanding now. "I will admit I was surprised when I found out you were his godson, but you have to be related to someone, the Wizarding world is too small."

"You were born in a Pureblood family?" Hermione asked neutrally.

"If it matters, to a Halfblood family; my father was a Muggle-born," she clarified.

"It doesn't matter at all," Hermione replied quickly, "I was just curious."

Sophie nodded her acknowledgment before turning back to Harry. "What were the other tests?"

"There's only one other." Harry looked at Sirius. "You're very, very sure?"

"No doubts for either of us, Harry."

Harry nodded in understanding before looking at his bond-mates. At their look of understanding, Harry pulled out his wand and put up several privacy spells, surprising Sophie. She was totally floored when the three girls shared their hidden secret of their bonding to Harry with her.

"Now I understand why all Sirius could tell me was that the three of you were betrothed and lived together; but I still don't understand how." She looked at the four.

"And you'll have to continue to wonder," Harry said with a grin. "I don't share that secret with many. Perhaps I will after you're married."

Sophie looked at Sirius in wonder, but he put a calming hand on her arm. "No, he's not being rude so please don't take offense. He has a very good reason."

After a moment, she turned to Harry and said, "My apologies, you surprised me and I'll be patient."

"Thank you for understanding," Harry said graciously.

With the most important task done, at least from Sirius's point of view, they all adjourned to the dining room for dinner and more discussion, which everyone enjoyed. At the end of the night, all four bond-mates approved of Sophie for Sirius.

Harry greeted the last guest to his seventeenth birthday party. "Hello, Luna; I'm glad you could come."

"Thank you, Harry." Luna looked around uncertainly as she removed the small bag from her shoulder.

"If you'll hand it to Dobby," Harry pointed behind her as the elf had just returned from after taking care of Neville. She did and Harry then escorted her to the pool area, where music, food, and the rest of the guests were.

"Are you nervous, Harry?" Luna asked, blinking slowly as was her habit.

He knew she did not mean the birthday party. "A little ... I'd say that it's not every day one gets married, but I will do it twice more."

Luna gave him a soft chuckle before they joined the others and he let her go so he could join his out-of-town friends.

So far, it looked like Philip and Camila were blending in reasonably well. Fortunately, they had learned enough English that they could communicate with everyone else here, even if it was slowly. Philip and Camila were also the latest to learn the bond-mates secrets, and like most others, they did not learn Harry's secret as to how it happened.

His two best Beauxbatons friends were presently discussing

Quidditch with Ginny, Ron, and the twins.

Grabbing Hermione's hand and receiving a loving look from her, Harry surveyed the rest of his guests. The only person missing from those who had also been invited to his wedding day after tomorrow was Headmistress Maxime, who would meet them at the wedding site and perform the ceremony.

"It would be nice to have the ceremony here," Hermione said softly, as if reading his mind.

"Yeah, it would, but with the way the English laws are written..." He sighed with equal parts exasperation and frustration.

The British Ministry of Magic would only recognize the first one he married, Hermione; the others would have to be "consorts" and would not be recognized legally in the same way Hermione would. However, Magical France still had an old law on the books that allowed polygamous marriages, although usually only one or two were done a year. Madame Maxime had explained that it was at the request of the Veela, who had a large settlement in France and they were normally the only ones who took advantage of the law. They could have also been married in Egypt, but they did not really want to travel that far.

A slightly raised but indistinct voice caught his attention. Turning, he saw Arthur Weasley pulling Molly aside. Harry smiled and looked at Hermione, who was looking in the same direction with a slight frown. "I wonder what that's about."

"I'm not sure, but she had better not ruin my wedding," his bride-to-be said adamantly.

Moving his hand up to her shoulders and pulling her close. "She won't; Arthur promised there would be no problem. If it makes you feel better, I've got promises from Bill and twins that they help make

sure we'll have no troubles in that area."

Hermione did look relieved to hear that and she stretched up slightly to give him a kiss on the cheek. "I love you, Harry."

He pulled her to him for a moment. "And I love you too."

"Dinner and then presents?" she asked.

"I think so, with cake before the presents." He kissed her on the temple before calling Dobby and setting dinner into motion. The only thing missing, he thought, was his parents. However, no matter how much he missed having his parents here, he would not bring them here with the Resurrection Stone - that was too emotional.

— — —

With the Weasleys, Sirius, and Sophie returning home for the night, the Potters were only one bedroom short for their out of town guests, causing Fleur to stay in Gabrielle's room.

Harry found Fleur's smirk at him to be amusing when she figured out why she could sleep in Gabrielle's bed. He also thought there might be a touch of wishful thinking also, but he had heard from Bill that the two were getting very close and Harry suspected that Bill might have already asked the Veela if Harry was not about to have his wedding, but Bill had delayed so as not to steal any thunder - as the saying went. Harry thought that was very honorable of Bill.

Knowing all of his guests were settled, Harry retired to his room. He had barely closed the door behind him when several spells shot past him and hit the door. There was no difficulty recognizing the various privacy spells.

Looking around, he gave a little gasp and did not breathe again for a

long moment. Standing next to his bed were his three bond-mates all dressed in skimpy lingerie much like Ginny had been at the beginning of the summer.

"Come receive your last present, Harry," Gabrielle told him with a bright smile.

Harry had seen her dressed in little before, but somehow seeing her right now really drove home how much she had grown up lately. He would swear she was a fifth year and she had the curves for it.

Ginny was about to turn sixteen and she looked only a little older than Gabi, causing him to remember Ginny's comment at Gabi's last birthday party about them looking the same age soon. He thought it would be by Christmas time. Nevertheless, Ginny was still pretty in her own way that he found just as attractive as the young Veela.

Then on the other end of the line was the girl he was about to marry. There was no doubt she was a girl with the fullest breasts and hips of the three, as well as a face and mind that he was very attracted to. He also noticed that she seemed to be the least enthusiastic of the three.

Remembering to breathe, Harry walked slowly over to them. "What's wrong?" he asked the oldest.

When she did not immediately answer, Ginny did. "She didn't want to dress this way for you for two more days."

"And?"

"We told her she had to because this was your seventeenth birthday," Gabrielle said firmly, "and she had to do what we wanted because she was about to get you to herself for a whole week." A mischievous appeared as Gabrielle added, "I also told her it was like this or I'd come naked."

His eyes went wide as he considered that, causing Hermione to harrumph. It was all he could do not to laugh out loud as the thought of Hermione being threatened with nudity.

"It wouldn't have been my first choice, but I might have gone along with it," Ginny said quietly and giving him a very interested look; she received a glare from Hermione. "Might," she reiterated for the older girl's benefit.

"Why are you grinning so much?" Hermione asked him pointedly.

It was not until then that Harry realized how much he was grinning. He shook his head slightly as he looked at her. "Hermione, while I realize that would cross a line," that will soon go away he thought, "I am a teenage boy and we're talking about three pretty girls - three very pretty and almost naked girls."

To show her he really meant it, he walked across the room and gave her a kiss, making it as passionate as he could. When he finally pulled back, she looked mollified to him. Then just because, he kissed Ginny and Gabrielle, each as they liked to be kissed.

Before long, he was pulled into bed as yet another girl kissed him and somehow one or more of them had taken all of his clothes off but his boxers - his line for the night.

Over an hour later, the lights finally went out and they were all snuggled together. Harry declared the last present from them to be the best one he had ever received - it was truly Patronus worthy. His only regrets were that it had come to an end, and that he had been so occupied that he was reasonably sure that Veela hands had wandered where they really should not have. Still, he thought he would forgive her since she had organized this time.

Harry also considered Gabi's comment about what this could be like

when he turned twenty-one and they had no rules requiring clothes. He shivered suddenly and wondered if he would survive that. While he thought he was safe from that scenario as he did not think they could talk Hermione into it, he was not going to bet against it either, as he would have said tonight would never happen.

(Aug 1997)

Since they had to get married in France, the Delacours had graciously offered their house. Jean-Aimé had even created a beautiful rose garden with fairies in it for the ceremony.

Harry stood at the front with Madame Maxime officiating, Neville and Philip were beside him. All of his guests, the same from the party two days previous, were turned and watching Ginny as the Maid of Honor and then Gabrielle walk up the aisle. Finally, Dan escorted Hermione to him.

Hermione had tried to mix the Muggle and Magical ceremonies, which was fine with him. He would never tell her, but he really did not care as long as they were married at the end.

Truth be told, the ceremony was over before Harry realized it as he only had eyes for Hermione. There was no way he could tell anyone exactly what had been done, other than the placing of the rings on each other's hand and the final spell at the end that signified their marriage.

After another party, he and Hermione changed, grabbed their bags, and Apparated to Nice. The plan was to spend the night there and then board a cruise ship the next day to spend a week sailing the Mediterranean Sea.

— — —

When Harry returned from his honeymoon with Hermione, he tried to spend as much of his free time as possible with Gabrielle. While not overly fair to Hermione or Ginny, he had to as Ginny's birthday was three day afterwards, and he wanted some special time with Ginny, before his family was to go to France for the last half of the month. He really hoped he could relax again once he arrived at the Delacours.

On the twelfth of August, the bond-mates took the Grangers to the Burrow - and met Sirius and Sophie there - for Ginny's birthday party. They all had a lot of fun.

Back at Potter Manor, Harry looked at Ginny. "I think that went well."

"It did, although," Ginny grinned at him, "that might be because she worked herself like a house-elf and had little time for the guests. I think it's a little sad, but that was probably the best time I've ever had when my mother was around, at least after I was old enough to realize what was going on."

"Yeah, it is," Harry agreed, "but maybe it's because she's getting better and really starting to accept that you're growing up. She hardly sees you anymore and you go over looking so beautiful and not at all like a little girl."

Ginny blushed, but she also look appreciative. "I can hardly wait to show you how grown up I am, Harry," she teased him.

He kissed her to get back at her, but her smile did not go away. "I look forward to that tomorrow night."

The next day, Harry left Hermione and Gabrielle home for their own little holiday while Harry took Ginny to Dublin. He was not sure why she wanted to go there for her sixteenth birthday celebration, but he was fine with it. Then again, they did not see all that much of Dublin, staying in their hotel room most of the time.

When they returned from the trip, Emma gave them a knowing look, but did not say anything.

A few days after the bond-mates had arrived at the Delacours, Apolline called them all into the living room after she had put little David to bed for the night.

Harry instantly noticed the two adult Delacours looked very serious and Fleur was not present, not that Gabrielle's older sister was there very much because of her job and seeing Bill Weasley. Nevertheless, he mentally braced himself for something unusual.

"Gabrielle, are you still happy in this bond?" Apolline asked casually, surprising all the bond-mates.

"Mother! Why are you asking? You know I am! I will not leave Harry!" Gabrielle looked and sounded upset.

Apolline nodded and held up a hand for silence as she smiled at the girl. "I'm glad you are, my little angel, and I'd never ask you to leave him. I was just asking before we talked about something very serious. Your reaction also tells me it is time for this talk." She looked at the other two girls. "You need to know a few things about Veela so you know what to expect and how to ... deal with Gabrielle when the Time of Change comes."

"I thought we were already in her Time of Change?" Hermione looked surprised.

"If I called it that before, I apologize. She is in and nearly complete with her maturation phase, or that's our official term for it. I expect her to finish in about a year from now, or by her fifteenth birthday at the latest, at which point she start to age normally for adult Veela.

"No, her Time of Change is completely different as it is equivalent to

your finishing your puberty." As Hermione started to question her, Apolline stopped her with her hand again.

"For you, puberty and maturing are part of the same process, or perhaps I should say they happen at the same time although you can continue to grow after you're sexually mature. For a Veela, it's the other way around and they physical mature then they have their puberty or sexual maturity. So those two phases of growth do not happen at the same time like it did for you. In time, or from now until about three years from now, Gabrielle will become sexually mature and start her breeding periods. If you remember, I told you that all Veela do this twice a year, once in the spring and once in the fall. It is only then that we can get pregnant.

"During those times, Gabrielle will become very sexually active, or her desire will be twice what it would be normally." A knowing look and smile slowly came over Apolline as she watched all the bond-mates blush, with Harry being the reddest.

"It's not possible to say when this will happen, but it could start this fall. When this event comes, Harry, you must take Gabrielle somewhere private as absolutely soon as is possible. Gabrielle will be able to hold it back for only a short time. The first time for a Veela is very intense and possibly destructive to anyone else around ... and I do mean everyone else."

She pinned the other two girls with a hard stare. "If you are around when Gabrielle enters her first mating, for your and Harry's sake, you must leave as fast as you possibly can. Apparating would be the best way."

"Of course their first time should be private," Hermione said, "but you make it sound like more than that."

"I am. Gabrielle will not be able to control herself and she will attack any other female present, and not as you see her now, but as a

transformed Veela with all of her considerable adult powers. She will not recognize you as you are and will attack to defend her "territory", kill if needed. She will not be in her right mind and you should treat her as insane and get away. This is why most Veela live in a Veela colony from the time they are eleven until about eighteen. It is easily handled there. We had to take very special precautions with Fleur."

"What about Harry?" Ginny asked quietly and soberly.

"Harry will be safe in a way you are not because he is her mate." Apolline looked at Harry, "However, you have a different problem." She looked at her husband who pulled out three phials of a light blue liquid and set them on the table in front of Harry.

"That is a potion that you will need to take, Harry. It will allow you to be able to handle a transformed Gabrielle, just like a male Veela would."

"Harry," Jean-Aimé was just as serious. "Do not - ever - under any circumstances - take that potion and then attempt to have sex with Hermione or Ginny. It is possible you could kill them. Also, never take that potion for any reason other than for sex with Gabrielle, because when you take that potion, you will be having sex very soon thereafter, no matter who is around. Do you understand the seriousness of this?"

A very embarrassed Harry nodded. This had to be worse than "The Talk" with Sirius because it concerned Gabrielle's parents, or so he thought. He started to talk, but had to stop to clear his throat to find his proper voice. "I'll be very careful, but why is it so dangerous?"

"That's a good question that you should ask," Apolline replied. "The potion will bring change you so that you are transformed into something like a male Veela. You can think of it like a combination strength, reflex, stamina, and lust potion. One dose should last close to an hour. Here are the instructions to make it." She pulled out small

scroll and placed it beside the three phials. "Each batch makes three doses, each of which will last about one year. If you do not need them before next summer, please give them to us and we'll use them or find someone who needs them."

Gabrielle looked at Harry with a slightly strangled look. Thinking about one's parents having sex was never pleasant, even if you knew they must have or you would not exist.

"I would also advise you to have at least three doses with you the first time, although six would be better. Three is enough to satisfy the first urge while you make more." Apolline shifted in her chair a little, as if she was not the most comfortable with this topic either. "Having a house-elf available is another way to make it work better, as he can go get more of the potion for a reliable source. You might want to send your elf here to get some from me, for example.

"Do you understand all of this? And please ask questions if you have any at all, because misunderstandings can get people hurt." Apolline looked at each of them, although her longest looks were for Harry and Gabrielle.

"I do have one," Harry said quietly, trying to figure out how to ask it. Apolline and Jean-Aimé were very patient and gave him time. He wondered if Jean-Aimé had had a similar conversation with Grandmother and Grandfather Morel.

"Well, Gabrielle is only about to turn fourteen in..." he started and looked at the girl.

"About five weeks," Gabrielle filled in for him.

"Yes, five weeks. But, well, she'll be fourteen and, I uh..." He did not know how to really ask it without sounding like some sort of pervert.

Apolline looked at her husband and said, "I think I should answer

this."

Jean-Aimé's mouth tightened but he nodded and looked away, definitely uncomfortable with this topic.

"Harry," she said with as much caring as she could. "Jean-Aimé and I both appreciate you trying to protect Gabrielle and make her as normal as you can, including being age appropriate in matters between you and her. I would like you to continue that for as long as you can; however, please understand that when her puberty - her sexual maturity - hits, you won't have a choice in this. If you do not mate, or have sex, with her, it will probably kill her and possibly you, and that will probably cause Hermione and Ginny to go insane when you die because of the broken bond."

He stared at her in horror.

"I'm very sorry to have to be so ... blunt, so graphic and to embarrass you like this, but you must understand the seriousness of this. It should help you to know that most Veela don't go through this until they are sixteen or seventeen. However, I'm telling you this now because a few Veela do this when they are fourteen, and a few more at fifteen, and I don't want there to be any accidents." Apolline took a deep breath and let out a weary sigh. "To make it worse, my mother and I don't know what will happen because of your Rescue Bond. It might make this come early, or late, or it might have no affect at all. We don't know and I'm sorry I can't give you a better prediction, but there isn't any information to guide you in your special case."

"I understand now." Harry looked at his youngest mate and grabbed her hand to comfort her. She smiled back, happy for his unspoken promise to help her through it.

"Apolline," Hermione said in the silence. "What did Fleur do since she went to Beauxbatons?"

"That's actually a good question," Apolline replied, leaning back in her chair and relaxing for the first time since the conversation started. "We made an arrangement for a Portkey that would take Fleur from school directly to the Veela Colony. The Headmistress was the only one who could put the proper spells on it to leave the school's wards. You should consider talking to her to do something similar for Gabrielle, especially if this doesn't happen by next spring."

Harry nodded in understanding. "Yes, for after we're finished with school, but Gabrielle is still there."

"Maybe I should leave and have private tutors so I can stay near you?" Gabrielle suggested and asked. She had not been aware of what had been done for Fleur before today.

"I don't know, but we'll decide something when we get there." Harry looked at Gabrielle then the potions and started to wonder if being married to a Veela as really all that great considering what she and he would have to deal with, not to mention what they would put Hermione and Ginny through.

Fortunately, the rest of their summer was relaxing. Harry, Hermione, and Ginny would be starting seventh year and Gabrielle would be starting fourth year in a few weeks.

(Dec 1997)

As Harry and the girls went home to Potter Manor for Christmas, Harry felt relieved, although he did not say anything to the girls.

While he usually had sex with Hermione and with Ginny once a week each, Gabrielle had not hit her puberty this fall. To make it all better, she was now fourteen but looked about sixteen. Since she looked as old as Ginny did, it eased his conscience greatly. If this spring was Gabrielle's Time of Change, then at least she looked old enough for him to rationalize being completely intimate with her.

He had also come to terms with what would happen to her and thought he understood a little better why the Purebloods in Britain wanted to classify Veela as "creatures". He thought the bigots were completely and totally wrong, but he did understand that some could view the Veela's urges as something that was uncontrollable, hence like an "unintelligent creature". He also recognized that the Pureblood bigots also overlooked that facts that Veela could successfully breed with normal wizards, therefore they were just as human, and the fact that the Veela were just as (and sometimes more) intelligent than the bigots (due to inbreeding).

Harry was looking forward to the Christmas holidays this year because Sirius and Sophie were getting married. He thought it would be a lovely time.

Several days later at the wedding, all of Harry's expectations were true except for two. First, the party after the ceremony was fairly large, meaning they had to navigate around a lot of people who wanted to talk to The-Boy-Who-Lived - something he never liked. Second, Remus surprised him greatly.

Since Remus stood up with Sirius, it was not until the party afterward that Harry saw Remus with a woman on his arm. She was near Remus's age and generally attractive, he thought, for a woman old enough to be his mother. The only thing really unusual about her was a long and ugly scar on the left side of her neck.

"Harry, I'd like you to meet Ruth. Ruth Shefferland, this is Harry Potter, a family friend and also my employer."

Without pause, Harry kissed the back of her hand to greet her formally. "Miss Shefferland, a good day to you."

"Thank you, Mr Potter, and a good day to you as well, but Ruth will be fine."

"Then please call me, Harry." He turned to Remus with an inquiring smile. "So, are you going to pull a Sirius on me?" Ruth looked lost, but Harry kept his attention on Remus.

Remus cleared his throat as if having trouble at finding his voice. After a moment, he told her with a sheepish look, "Sirius sprung his engagement to Sophie on Harry without telling him they were dating first." As she nodded in understanding, he continued with, "No, Harry, Ruth and I are merely friends at the moment, although we have been on a few dates that have gone rather well."

"I see," Harry said with a grin, looking at the woman and trying to figure her out.

Still a little uncomfortable, Remus said, "I took your advice, so yes she is."

Ruth figured out what Remus was saying and stiffened as well as glared at him.

"Please do not be too hard on him, Ruth," Harry easily said, trying to be as friendly to her as possible. "I hold no prejudice against you or him." When she looked surprised, he asked, "Didn't he tell you?"

She glanced around to see who was near before she lowered her voice. "Yes, but it's difficult because so few trust a werewolf."

"Fortunately for you, the Potters understand. When Remus is ready, I'll add you to the wards so you can come visit him as long as you follow the two obvious expectations or rules." He paused to see what she would say.

"Be safe so no one gets hurt?"

"It's only once a month, but yes. In case it's not obvious, the second

is that we ask you to respect our place and our privacy; it is another downside of what happened when I was a baby - too much fame," explained Harry.

"I understand and I can do both of those," she told him with a smile.

Harry looked at Remus and the man nodded. "Very well, let's wait until later and find a private place and I'll add her to the wards." He looked around and found the girls and waved them over. "Let me introduce you to my wives." Noticing Ruth struggling to hold back words, he chuckled. "I'll explain that if Remus puts a ring on your finger, until then, just know that they are my wives - although the last is only betrothed.

The day that the bond-mates return to Beauxbatons, Ruth moved in with Remus.

(Mar 1998)

It was early on the Friday morning before Spring break. Like many such mornings, the Potters, Philip, Camila, and Jolien, along with one of the teachers, were having breakfast. As they were finishing, Headmistress Maxime came into the room and looked around for a moment before striding over to their table with a rather pleased expression.

Leaning over, the Headmistress softly spoke to him, "M Potter, please bring your family to my office as soon as you finish. There is a visitor here that you must speak with."

Harry looked at his bond-mates and noticed all eyes were on him, including those who were just friends. The four of them all looked to be done, or close enough. "Of course, Headmistress, we'll come now." The four rose together and they all said a hasty good-bye to their friends.

In the corridor, the Headmistress motioned for Harry to walk beside her; the girls walked closely behind him to more easily hear. "M Potter, I want you to know that my offer for your family to live here for the next three years and for employment in junior positions still stands. However, you will want to consider what this gentleman has to say in regards to your future. I will guarantee you that he is who he says he is and that you will be perfectly safe with him."

"Err, all right." Harry's mind was swirling with curiosity. At first, he had thought that maybe Sirius had come to visit again, but after her last statement, it was obviously someone else.

The Headmistress had offered he and Hermione junior staff positions for the next three years while Gabrielle finished her schooling. Ginny would come and go while living here while she pursued a career in Professional Quidditch - or at least that was the plan at this time. He was not sure about taking the Headmistress's offer, as tempting as it was. They had also considered moving to Potter Manor so the four could live together and then hiring tutors to help Gabrielle finish her school work so she could take her NEWTs one day.

Headmistress Maxime led them to the room next to her office and opened the door. Inside was a long table and many chairs around it: obviously the staff conference room. Standing next to a window and looking out was a man who appeared to be in his late thirties with medium brown hair and in reasonably good physical shape. When he turned around at the sound the group entering, they saw a kind face with light blue eyes, an amused smile, and goatee. He was dressed primarily in brown suede leather, laced up with a black leather cord at the neck opening.

"Ah, M Potter, it's very nice to meet you." He held his hand out and Harry shook it, completely bewildered as to who this was. "Mme Potter." He took Hermione's hand and kissed it formally. "Mlles Potter," he said to Ginny and Gabrielle, kissing their hands as well. "I am Nicolas Flamel and I would like to talk with you about

apprenticing with me for the next few years while you need to stay close to the school."

Harry frantically searched his memory for that name as he was sure he had heard of the man before. Hermione obviously had by her gasp. He looked over and Ginny struggling with the name too, while Gabrielle looked wide-eyed at the man.

"The Nicolas Flamel?" Hermione asked reverently.

The man chuckled. "Yes."

A memory from History of Magic floated up and it hit Harry just who this was. He turned to look at his Headmistress so quickly he got a knot in his neck muscles.

The tall woman smiled at him and nodded. "I have met him twice before and this really is him. I'll be next door in my office if you need me." She quietly left the room and closed the door behind her.

Flamel pulled his wand and put up several privacy spells, one of which Harry had never seen before. "There, now we can speak of things no one else should hear. I'm sure you are wondering why I wanted to talk with you?"

All four nodded, Ginny had finally remembered who he was too.

"One of the ways I remain young at heart is to bring in a promising young wizard or Wizing couple from time to time to work with me on a project or two as an apprentice to not only help me look at things differently, but to help push the boundaries of magic. Therefore, I keep watch on those who stand out in some way." He gestured towards the seats at the table. "Tea or coffee?" He poured himself a coffee and the four a cup of tea as they made themselves comfortable. One cup was left over.

"Like most others, my first introduction to you was your survival of the tragedy that befell your family. To anticipate your question," he said casually as Harry opened his mouth, "no, I did not know your parents. I am sorry for your loss as no young person should be deprived of their family.

"As interesting - magically - as that was, it wasn't enough for me to come speak with you as that was more a product of what your parents did to protect you. What did get my interest were the events surrounding you while at Hogwarts and your reaction to them, especially your relationships and by what happened during the Triwizard Tournament."

Nicolas mused for a moment to himself. "You could have met me your first year when I visited the school, but I believe you were in class at the time."

"How do you know all of this?" Hermione asked rapidly, a little bit of fear in her voice.

The man chuckled as he held his hand up to halt her protest. "Please, Mme Potter, do not be alarmed. Much of what I know comes from public sources. I will admit that I have a number of people from all over Europe who send me reports of interesting things from time to time, and I have one person whom I shall not name, at Hogwarts. From that person, who only knows me by an alias, all I know is what anyone who was in the Great Hall or the corridors would have seen, as well as speculation. I have no knowledge of what might or might not have happened in your dorms or in much of your personal lives. My request was for knowledge of people who do interesting things in a magical way. That may still be a little more intrusive than you're comfortable with and if so, I apologize. However, that is how I find people to apprentice from time to time."

Harry did feel a little uncomfortable about that, but was not sure what to do other than to nod acknowledgement.

"Exactly what did we do that caught your attention?" Hermione asked sounding very cautious.

"That's very simple," Flamel said with an engaging grin. "You didn't act like normal students." At their surprised looks, he chuckled. "Let me try to explain.

"Your first year, I'm told was fairly normal, except that you," he said to Harry, "and Mlle Granger developed a close friendship - one that caused you two to become almost inseparable even though you had never met before. In and of itself, that was nothing, at least until your second year.

"Then came the difficulty with the monster running around in the castle and petrifying people. I was very impressed with what I heard about your rescuing Mlle Weasley, although I'm sure I only heard the highlights of the story. After that, Mlle became almost inseparable as well. Now, as the number of unusual events surrounding you grew, my curiosity was pricked.

"The next year went relatively smoothly, except that all three your academics started to soar. Again, not an issue by itself, but with everything else happening, including Mlle Weasley starting to spend summers with you two - a difficult fact to find," he said with a smile. "That started me to thinking why that might be.

"I must tell you that at that point, you were still only intriguing candidates. Then came your fourth year and the Triwizard Tournament."

He sighed and shook his head. "I can appreciate the results, but you have my sympathy for the difficulty of that year."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

Flamel shook his head. "Having been alive at the time the Tournament was created, I'm reasonably sure there was a way for M Potter not to have participated, at least as long as it was done before the first task. Unfortunately, I was not able to do that without revealing myself again to Albus Dumbledore after he caused me to sacrifice the best fake I possessed of my Philosopher's Stone and we parted ways. You see, after that event, I told Dumbledore that was it and he would never see me again. The fact that he is on death's door and will never leave the hospital he is in is another reason I'm coming to you now.

"But back to your question. It was your fourth year that helped me to decide to give you an invitation when you were old enough. I was in disguise, but I was at all three tasks to watch firsthand. Your magical power and situational awareness is outstanding, M Potter. Your intelligence and wisdom is outstanding, Mme Potter," he said to Hermione. "And your power and loyalty are outstanding, Mlle Potter," he said to Ginny.

By saying it twice, Ginny finally understood he had not made a slip of the tongue the first time. "Wait," her eyes narrowed, "how do you know to call me Ginny Potter? Outside of family, only the Headmistress knows that."

Flamel chuckled quietly. "I wondered if you'd catch that and I will answer that by going to the third." He looked at Gabrielle, "And you, Mlle Potter, gave me the final clue to it all ... although you four covered your tracks so well, if I didn't write my research down, I believe I'd still be in the dark."

"But I am not a Potter yet," Gabrielle protested.

"Not legally, no, but magically you are. It took me nearly two months to figure out why various lines in my journals became so smudged I couldn't read them and why I had written that you, M Potter, are just like me," Flamel said as he leaned back in his chair with an amused

smile as he watched them work through what he had said.

Harry saw Hermione look at him and it was obvious she was puzzling through his words as hard as he was. Why was the famous wizard just like me, he thought. After a moment, an idea started to form and he batted it around trying to make it take shape but it seemed to be resisting.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Hermione asked with worry as she saw sweat starting to break out on his brow and his expression become more pained. She turned to Flamel, "Whatever you're doing, stop it!"

"I'm doing nothing, Madame," he said leaning forward. "But perhaps I should help him before he hurts himself and I do not wish to wait two months for him."

"You're ... like ... me," Harry ground out. "You ... are hiding ... it."

"Excellent, M Potter. Please relax and I'll tell you..."

"You're ... bonded!" Harry shouted the last word and then fell back in his chair exhausted as he had just finished his morning exercises. All three girls looked at the man.

"Bravo! M Potter, bravo! Listen carefully. Nicolas and Perenelle of the Flamels were magically bonded when Nick rescued Nelle and saved her life triggering a power, the discovery of his special magic."

Harry relaxed completely now with no reason to struggle and he noticed his girls nodding in understanding.

"I felt that was fair," Flamel said to them, "since I knew of your power and bonds."

"But how?" Hermione asked.

Flamel chuckled. "Mme Potter, the Fidelius Charm is not all powerful magic. All magic can be defeated in some way. To the normal person who has never heard of Rescue Bonding, your spell will protect you completely. To those few who know of its existence, they also will probably never figure out your secret - it's possible, but very unlikely. To someone who also has the power, you can not hide your secret if the person truly tries to break it. That is why I could, although it did take me two months. To use an analogy, it would be like trying to hide the truth that Veela can create fireballs. That might work against me," he pointed at Gabrielle, "but not against her as you're trying to deprive her of knowledge of her very nature. She might forget for a short time, but eventually she will recover the knowledge. There are other ways to defeat the spell, but my explanation holds for why I could discover your secret.

"Now, there is a very important part of my life that we have only just mentioned. My wife, Perenelle." Without looking, he waved his left hand as an introduction and a woman faded in just beyond his hand.

She was very pretty, Harry thought, as he looked at her hair that was so blonde it was nearly white, her pretty smile under deep blue eyes. She wore a simple dress that went down to mid-calf and matched Nicolas's style with a white blouse top and brown bodice and skirt. Her bodice was laced up in front with a black leather cord too.

Perenelle graced them with a curtsy. "Hello, and I hope I have not frightened you. We thought was best to conceal my presence until the secret was given. Also, you are the only ones that know I am here, except for the house-elves apparently." She moved over and took the last cup to pour herself a cup of coffee before sitting next to her husband.

As she made herself comfortable, Harry and Gabrielle said almost simultaneously, "You're a Veela!"

"Bravo, I knew you'd figure it out quickly. I'm sure you'd figure it out

soon, but I will simply tell you that we can invite all three of you," she indicated the girls, "because you're already bonded."

Hermione nodded, "That makes sense. We are very careful to make sure one or more of us is around Harry when he is out in public."

"We've already prevented one other bonding four years ago," Ginny confirmed.

"Two others," Gabrielle added, "my sister too three years ago."

"So," Nicolas said as he clapped his hands together in enthusiasm and leaned forward in his chair, "let's discuss the details. We have a cottage on our property you can stay in. We'll need to expand it for you to be comfortable, but that's easy. Mlle Gabrielle will need three more years to finish Beauxbatons, so I'll offer a three year apprenticeship. During that time, you, M Potter and Mme Potter can live full time. Mlle Ginny can travel as she needs to for her profession, which I believe she will succeed in finding, and stay with us when she's not traveling. And finally, Mlle Gabrielle can either stay at school during the week and stay with us during the weekend or she can become a day student and stay with us every night and on the weekends."

"I can do that? I can become a day student?" Gabrielle asked very surprised.

"Yes, I've already cleared the possibility with Headmistress Maxime. I would suggest that you move in the last week in August to start this, as you probably already have summer plans."

Perenelle took over now. "We also have a number things we can teach you and," she grinned at Gabrielle, "I'm really looking forward to having another Veela around for a time."

"Yes, there are a lot of exciting things we can do," Nicolas said, still

enthusiastic. "M Potter, what do you want to learn?"

"Well, I've started to become more interested in how things work. I've been considering going to a Muggle university for an engineering degree. I'd like to know if I can make Muggle electric things work with Magic."

"Bravo!" Flamel roared. "I've been trying to work on the theory of making Muggle electronics work under strong wards. Our projects will work together very well. Mme Potter?"

"Potions and transfiguration for me," she said thoughtfully, obvious considering the many possibilities in front of her.

"Potions with me and transfiguration with Nelle." He looked at Ginny. "There's no reason you can't take some of your lessons with you. Traveling can be boring after a while."

"Charms and runes," Ginny said a little meekly, still in awe of the famous couple.

"Charms with Nelle and runes with both of us." He looked at Gabrielle. "We can help you with advanced work for your school classes."

Gabrielle considered the question for a moment. "I don't have any special desire, but Charms interest me the most."

"Also with Nelle." Flamel looked at Harry. "Of course, Defense will also be something we'll do together because you are good at it and because you always need to be ready to defend your young ladies."

Harry nodded seriously. "I'd like to hope that will never be necessary, but I agree that I should always be ready."

"Wonderful..."

"Nick, you're jumping ahead of yourself." Perenelle had a hand on her husband's arm to stop him. Turning to the students, she asked, "My husband seems to have forgotten his manners and has assumed you want to come without asking. Do you want to take our offer and join us?"

Harry appreciated her asking, although he had a hard time imagining them telling the couple no. "Does anyone not want to do this?"

"I want to," Hermione said without hesitation.

Harry smiled and grabbed her hand, not surprised at her jumping at such a special learning opportunity as this. "Ginny? Gabrielle?" He received two yeses, so he said, "It looks like we be living with you starting at the end of August. We usually finish the summer with some time at the Delacours, so we can join you after that."

"Splendid! I shall send you a letter when I shall arrive to escort you to our place. It is well hidden and you would not find it without my help. I believe we must go tell the Headmistress of the new plans," Flamel said as he stood.

"And I must leave." Perenelle stood, pulled something out of her dress pocket and disappeared with a small pop.

Hermione looked at Nicolas wide-eyed. "She can do that here?"

"We can, but I don't think anyone else could," Nicolas said with a smug smile.

A few minutes later, Headmistress Maxime was informed of the bond-mates plans. While she disliked losing such able helpers for next year, she was happier for them with this special opportunity. She knew very well that this was a special opportunity for the Potters that they should not pass up.

(Jul 1998)

When the school year ended, Harry's Quidditch team had easily won the school championship. That had helped to give Ginny the notice she wanted and she received four offers for playing professional Quidditch. One of the offers was from the Holyhead Harpies, her favorite team, to be a reserve Chaser and she took that offer. Harry made sure he bought tickets to all of their home games for the other three of them.

Harry had been made several offers to become a professional Seeker. He turned them all down as he did not really want to travel so much, and because he needed to be nearby for Gabrielle. She still had not had her Veela puberty and he would have to be ready for that at a moment's notice.

All three thought they had done well on their NEWTs, although Hermione was a little stressed over them. Harry did his best to take her mind off of that by pulling her into the bedroom a little more often.

The bond-mates continued their usual schedule of spending some time at the beginning of July with the Delacours, then back to England and Potter Manor. This summer, the Grangers did not come to live at Potter Manor, but the bond-mates did have dinner many nights at the Grangers' home.

— — —

Harry and Hermione, with her on his arm, walked through the atrium of the English Ministry for Magic. The place was so busy, no one seemed to notice who they were, and for that, Harry was grateful. Stepping out of the elevator on the tenth floor, they found an older man waiting for them.

"Mr Potter, it's good to see you," Algernon Croaker said as he shook Harry's hand before turning to Hermione. "Mrs Potter, congratulations and it's good to see you as well. Won't you follow me?"

As he led them down the corridor, Croaker kept up light conversation until they reached his office, where he put up privacy wards.

"I want to thank you for coming to see me, I wasn't completely sure you would," the man said as he studied the two of them.

"We figured it was the polite thing to do, although it's not as much of an issue for us anymore. We really don't need a job at the moment as we've both accepted an apprenticeship with someone," Harry explained. "I don't know if you remember, but I'm also responsible for Gabrielle Delacour and she still has three years left in Beauxbatons, so I need to stay close to the school."

Croaker sighed and leaned heavily back in his chair. "I hadn't forgotten about Ms Delacour, but the apprenticeship is a surprise. May I ask who? Perhaps we have someone better here."

Harry looked at Hermione who smiled at him in mirth. "I don't believe that to be possible. I'm also sorry that I can't say who, as he strongly prefers privacy, but I promise this is an offer we simply can't refuse; he's that good."

The head Unspeakable grunted his frustration and tapped his desk lightly for a moment with a finger.

"If it matters, we did figure out the mystery of the ring," Hermione said, trying to make the man feel better. "I'd have to research in your Hall of Records to be sure, but from what I've been able to determine, Harry probably is the person with the closest ties to the Pervelle family."

"And did you figure out how to use it?"

"I did - once. It's in my vault now." Harry shuddered at the memory. He treasured talking to his parents, but it was still very haunting and deeply emotional for him still.

"And the other parts?" Croaker asked lightly, his finger still tapping, although it made almost no noise.

"If they turn up, I'll deal with them then. Personally, I wouldn't want the wand," Harry said neutrally.

Croaker looked like he was going to object then nodded slowly. "Perhaps that's wise. I would like to have it to study it, but who's to say how long I'd get to keep it." After a moment more, he asked very tentatively, "Would you be open to working part-time for me on some of our less sensitive projects? It would be a way to keep your foot in the door, so to speak."

Harry looked at Hermione and saw her raise an eyebrow at him, which he took as agreement that they did not really need that as Croaker seemed to be very intent on hiring them, even if he had to wait. "I suppose it doesn't hurt to discuss the possibility, but it would have to be work we could take with us and our mentor would have to be allowed to see it since we'll be living with him. Maybe he'd even offer suggestions, but I can't make a promise of that."

With a smile, Croaker leaned forward with his elbows on his desk. "How about you come work for me full time over the next month to experience what we do here? Then when you have to go, we can find something that's interested you and that I can allow out. You can work on it a few hours now and then and come see me one Saturday a month. When you're finished in France, we can talk about full time employment."

Hermione looked at Harry before she countered with, "We could work

here full time for a month and take work with us, but let's only do that until Christmas. It's possible we'd be too busy to do that for long and it's possible you might not like the part-time arrangement; so a shorter time gives everyone an out sooner. But if it goes well, then we can extend it." She raised an eyebrow at Harry after her "thinking out loud".

"I like that idea," Harry told her with a smile. "It lets everyone test the waters." He turned back to Croaker with a serious look. "If you like that, we can start next week, or if you don't, we can see if you still have a positions for us in three or four years."

Croaker flopped back in his chair and he did not look completely happy. "I suppose I still might get what I want that way, but I was hoping for more commitment." He looked pointedly at the pair.

"But no one gets what they want all the time," Harry returned calmly and did not budge.

With a sigh, Croaker stood and offered his hand to each of them in turn. "Congratulations on employment with the Department of Mysteries. I'll start you at the standard pay for new hires for the next month then a pro-rated amount after that. I'll meet you at the same place next Monday at 9am and I'll find an office with two free desks in it."

"That's very acceptable, Mr Croaker," Harry said followed by Hermione.

"Except for you immediate family and your mentor, not a word to anyone please; and for those you share with, make sure they know it's a secret. It's not much, but I like to think it makes it all a little safer for you."

"Thank you, Mr Croaker," Harry told him.

"As of Monday, it'll be Algernon. I'll see you then."

They were now employed, something not every new graduate could say.

(Aug 1998)

Just before they were to return to France, Harry and Hermione walked up to a modest home in Sheffield. Since Harry was holding an elongated box, he let Hermione ring the doorbell.

An older gentleman opened the door. "Yes?"

"Good morning, my name is Harry Potter and this is my wife, Hermione. Are you Mr Bradford Simmons?"

"I am. What can I do for you, Mr and Mrs Potter?"

"I'd like to hire you for a job."

Simmons looked at them for a moment. "I'm sorry you've wasted your time, Mr Potter, but I recently retired."

"So I've been told, but you may be the only person in the country who can help me. I was hoping you might like a little challenge, something you can work on a few hours each day. I will pay you." Harry gave him a hopeful look.

After a long moment, Simmons motioned them in. "I suppose it doesn't hurt to talk." He led them to the living room. "Why don't you start with why I'm the only person who can help you? There are plenty of electrical engineers."

Harry set the overly long bread box down on the table and took a seat with Hermione on the couch. "Mr Simmons, yes, I'm looking for an electrical engineer, but I also need one who came from an older

family, like your maternal grandfather's." When the man froze, Harry went on softly. "We're like him so we can't bring this problem to just anyone."

"It's been years and my father was so against it..." he said distantly.

"I can help you get in touch with him, if you want," Harry offered.

The man reached over to a table and grabbed a pipe, slowly packing and then lighting it, thinking all the while.

Harry and Hermione waited patiently.

"Exactly what do you want me to do? Not that I'll do it, mind you."

With hope, Harry leaned forward and unlatched the box to pull the top and sides off and set it on the floor. "I've put this experiment together over the last few weeks, although I've been thinking about it and planning it for over a year." On the table was the bottom of the wooden box, a light bulb in a socket on the far left end, a smallish generator next to it, a long rod to the far right end that held the rod, which was attached to a metal wheel. The wheel had a ring of golden crystals along the outside edge. There was also a mechanical switch in the middle near the metal wheel.

"What is that?" Simmons blew out some smoke and then leaned over to get a better look.

Harry pulled out his wand, which did not startle Simmons in the least, and touched it to a crystal while pushing some magic through his wand. The crystals lit and then the metal wheel started to spin and turn everything it was connected to. A second later, the light bulb lit. "That, Mr Simmons, is free energy. As long as the bulb doesn't break and the generator doesn't fail, it will continually run."

"Damn." Simmons moved his chair forward so he could sit right in

front of the table. He moved his hand towards the contraption then stopped with a look to Harry, who gave him a nod. The man unscrewed the light bulb and examined it before putting it back in, where it lit up again. The generator continued to quietly turn with only a hint of noise from friction of the various bearings. "How do you stop it?"

"I can either throw the switch, which would disengage the rod - the wheel would continue to turn; or I can use a little magic to stop the wheel," Harry explained.

"To answer your original question, Mr Simmons, my husband would like you to find out why we have to separate the wheel that far from the generator. It's well known to us that magic causes electrical devices to not work. That means the magical field causes the electrical field to fail, or the electrons to stop flowing. We want to know why, what the limit is in distance with regards to the various fields strength, and if that interference can be shielded against. Did I leave anything out, Harry?"

"No dear." He gave Hermione an appreciative look. He had sort of forgotten the original question.

"So you want me to perform tests to answer those questions?"

"Yes, Mr Simmons. We'll pay you fifty pounds an hour, but we also expect you to keep a journal which we will duplicate and use in our research as well. I hope to do something with this in the real world one day and we'll offer you a percentage of the company when we do," Harry told him.

Simmons blinked. "That's very generous." He turned back to the device. "How big do you think you could make one of these?"

Harry grinned. "I've yet to try to make a big one, but I think I could make a flywheel large enough to turn a megawatt generator, maybe

bigger if I'm lucky."

"That's not big enough for commercial applications," Simmons said with disappointment.

"I know, but wouldn't it be better with a whole field of these?" Harry argued. "If one breaks, you don't lose an entire power station but only a small part of it so it could be replaced more easily."

Simmons waved his pipe as if batting the idea. "A common argument and one that shouldn't be completely dismissed, but you'll have a harder time convincing the power companies to buy them when they're small."

"It may be possible to make bigger ones," Hermione told him, "but we need to know more about this whole thing before we try. I'm also going to research if I can make a potion that allows for a frictionless surface so the bearings wouldn't break and it could all turn faster."

The man blinked slowly at her. "Damn, that's a good idea if you can pull it off." He puffed his pipe for a moment. "This won't stop?"

"No, it takes ambient magic out of the environment to continue running once it's started," Harry replied. "That means you can't show it to anyone else as that would go against the Magical Statue of Secrecy."

"I see." Simmons looked at it again. "Timeline?"

"The sooner the better, but I'd like answers a year from now if possible." Harry held out his hand and Hermione put some folded papers in it. "Here's a basic contract that states you work for us and that you're expected to keep the research to yourself."

"An NDA, wise." Simmons took the paperwork and looked it over. When he finished reading it, he signed both copies and gave one

back to Harry. "My number is on there. Call me before you come to visit. It's just me now and I might have to tidy up."

"I'll be in the area once a month. How about I stop by on the last Saturday?" Harry suggested. "We can copy any notes and talk about progress. We can also help with any magic required for your experiments. If I'm not available, my wife or someone else in my family can stop by to help you test."

Simmons stood and held out his hand. "Thank you, Mr Potter, this looks like an interesting project and something to keep an old man busy. Mrs Potter, it was a pleasure meeting you too."

Harry left very pleased and he thought Nicolas would be too, at least once they started to get some real results.

— — —

It was three days after Ginny's seventeenth birthday and all of his close friends and family were gathered together just like last August. This time Philip was his best man instead of Neville. Gabrielle was the maid of honor and Harry would swear that she had toned down her look a little so as not to distract from Ginny. Hermione looked as wonderful as ever, but he was watching for Ginny.

As promised, Arthur Weasley escorted Ginny in. In the back of his mind, he realized he heard Mrs Weasley sniffing, but he only had eyes for Ginny. She was so beautiful, just as Hermione had been last year. He truly loved them both, although in different ways.

He was looking forward to his week honeymoon with her. She had wanted to travel to Italy and he had arranged that.

Again, Madame Maxime performed the ceremony and he remembered a little more this time, but not much. Ginny had created

this ceremony to be almost entirely Wizarding in nature, although he could see a few small things from Hermione's that Ginny had copied. In the end, he really didn't care as long as they were married.

— — —

Several days after Harry and Ginny returned from their honeymoon, the bond-mates packed up again for Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel's arrival. Harry found it amusing that Apolline immediately knew that Perenelle was a Veela and had to assume it was a Veela thing. He had known when they met because Perenelle had not bothered to control her allure and just let it go naturally. Today, Perenelle was controlling it but that did not seem to matter. He wondered if Gabrielle had told her mother.

After Jean-Aimé and Apolline had bid them good-bye, the Flamels took them away via a Portkey. They landed outside a large cottage. Other than being larger than normal, there was nothing to distinguish it for any other cottage in the area. In the back was another smaller cottage and a building that looked like a barn.

"Welcome to our main home," Nicolas told them. "Since we will be seeing so much of each other, you may call me Nick."

"You may call me Nelle," Perenelle told them.

"Thank you, and please call us by our first names," Harry requested. "I think that will be much easier."

Nelle smiled and nodded. "Thank you, I believe you are correct. We'll show you the main house later, but that building over there is our place for magical and experimental work. This extra cottage will be yours while you're here." She led them inside.

"I like it," Gabrielle said quickly and the others agreed.

"We tried to make it like a real home. There are also four bedrooms so you can each have some privacy if you want it. We didn't know how you handled your sleeping arrangements," Nelle said without embarrassment, "so if you need to make some changes then do as you wish. You have a full kitchen and if you'll give me your shopping list, I'll make sure our house-elf buys the food you need. Of course, we'll host most evening dinners in our home and you can join us there."

"There are only a few rules," Nick told them seriously. "First, you're old enough to be adults, so we will treat you as such. That means that you should also act as such. Second, there are few rooms that you are not to enter. I'll show them to you later, but they are also clearly marked. This is for your safety as we may have dangerous experiments in there. Lastly, other than Gabrielle going to school, please let us know when you leave and when you expect to return, even if it is only through a note. If something should happen to you, we need to know where to come look for you. As we asked you before not to mention you're staying with us to anyone besides immediate family, please continue that and be on your guard when away from here. There are those who are less than honorable who may try to get to us through you."

"We understand," Harry assured the man.

Nicolas reached into a pocket and pulled out four short gold chains. "Put these on a wrist like a bracelet, please. They are a Portkey that will bring you and only you here. You each must travel separately; the Portkeys do not work if anyone else is touching you. Gabrielle, yours will also take you to school; I worked with Madame Maxime to create that for you."

"Please take the rest of the afternoon to settle in and then come join us in the house for dinner. We can discuss what we shall be doing and plan." Nick looked at Ginny. "When will you be starting your job

for the Harpies?"

"In two weeks," she replied excitedly. "I can hardly wait to play on the team, although I will miss being with everyone all day long."

Nick chuckled. "I understand. However, your special Portkey will bring you here, even from England. I'd suggest you get a similar Portkey to take you to work every day. Of course, if you wish, all of you can travel to your home in Britain on the weekends if you desire. There is no requirement that you spend every moment here," he smiled kindly at them, "you only must stay here enough that we make progress and our time together is useful."

Harry thought that was considerate of the Flamels and promised himself that he would work hard when he was here.

Chapter 33 - Epilogue, Part 2

(Oct 1998)

Because they could, the Potters had traveled to the Delacours for the 10th of October. The whole family was there to celebrate Gabrielle's fifteenth birthday, including Bill Weasley who had recently asked Fleur to marry him.

They enjoyed an afternoon, dinner, and evening together as family. Harry truly appreciated his French in-laws; they were easy to get along with. At the end, the Potters returned to their cottage at the Flamels.

As usual, the two girls who were not staying with him gave him a kiss before sending him to bed and going to their bedrooms. Ginny also whispered, "Have fun," as she walked away with a smirk. Although it was normally her night, Gabrielle had switched with Ginny so Gabrielle could share her birthday night with Harry.

Since it was her fifteenth birthday, Harry really should not have been surprised by what happened next, yet he was.

Gabrielle came into his bedroom in her gown, as the girls usually did, and closed the door. With a sultry look on the girl that now looked seventeen, she undid the tie and let her gown drop to the floor, revealing all of her except for what her black thong covered. "It's finally my fifteenth birthday!" she exclaimed as she practically prowled over to him like a predator, her bare breasts lightly bouncing with each step.

Harry could not help his gulp as he took in her form and beauty. She was not perfect looking, but he thought every guy would say she was attractive - very attractive. Because of her boldness in going after what she wanted, he was sure she would have been sorted into Gryffindor had she attended Hogwarts. He was also wondering if he

should put a sticking charm on his boxers and her thong as she came into his arms and kissed him passionately before pulling him into bed.

- — —

The last Saturday in October, Harry got dressed after his morning workout and shower. He was very pleased with how everything was going. Their work with the Flamels was progressing nicely, slowly but nicely. The slowness was due to the magnitude of the project and how much there was to do.

He and Hermione were doing well in studying for their A-levels so they could attend a normal university someday. Gabrielle was doing well at Beauxbatons and Ginny was enjoying her Quidditch career.

In fact, they were to go back to Britain today to visit with Mr Simmons to check on his progress and to see a Harpies game. It was the third of the season and against the Cannons. Because the Harpies expected to win with ease, Ginny was supposed to start her first game - she was the leading reserve Chaser in her first season. Harry had also purchased two extra tickets so Ron and Neville could join him.

The first stop was Potter Manor, where Gabrielle would wait while he and Hermione had a short meeting with Croaker. He had given them a couple of old tomes in Nordic Runes to translate into English and then come up with interesting ways to use the spells and wards in the books. That had been slow work, but Croaker seemed pleased with their results.

Hermione and Harry then went to see Mr Simmons. The man seemed to be very happy working on the magical generator project. He gave Harry a bill for some equipment he had purchased and a good sized flywheel for Harry to take with him and make it spin with

magic. He planned to attach it to a large alternator, and if successful, it would power his whole house. Simmons had changed his mind about selling to power companies and was considering that their focus should be on the masses of smaller houses and such, assuming his prototype worked well.

Lunch was back at the house, where Ron and Neville joined them to travel to the game.

In the small box Harry had purchased seats, they all made themselves comfortable.

"So, what have you been up to, Ron?" Harry asked his friend that he did not hear from much.

Ron shifted a little uncomfortably as teams made themselves ready for the game. "Not too much, mostly working for Fred and George while I try to work on my Quidditch skills. The Cannons," he gestured towards the team, "said they didn't need a new Keeper this year, but they might next year."

Harry thought he detected some jealousy towards his sister since she had become a professional Quidditch player, but it was hard to tell. "I think that would be great," Harry told him with a smile and watched Ron light up too. "Just imagine, you could Keep while you played against Ginny."

Ron's smile fell a little. "I guess that would be amusing to you."

"It would be," Neville agreed, "but it would be cool to know two profession players too."

"Yes it would," Harry said and watched Ron perk back up. "Are you enjoying working for that professional greenhouse, Neville?"

"I am most of the time. Unfortunately, some of the most common

things we have to grow are fairly boring to work with, but they also let us have one personal project to see what we can do with it and if we can find something new and useful. I really like that part. What about you? Do you still like being an apprentice?"

"Yeah, and you've never said who with," Ron said.

All three of the Potters chuckled, but it was Hermione that answered. "That because we're not supposed to say who with. The man likes his privacy, but we are learning a lot. He and Harry may have Muggle electronics working under heavy magic in a year or two as well as other exciting things."

"Why?" Ron asked, looking as if Harry did not know what he was doing.

"Because I believe a mixed world is the best world, and one that we'll all eventually face. One day, Ron," Harry told his friends, "the secret of magic will get out and we'll all have to learn to live together. I want to be ready for that time."

"I don't think it'll ever happen," Ron disagreed, "magic is too good at hiding things."

"Time will tell," Harry said neutrally, but looked over at Hermione to see her shaking her head because Ron had just dismissed the idea without really thinking about it.

"They're about to start," Gabrielle said, pointing to Ginny as her team rose into the air to be introduced.

A few minutes later, the game started and the Harpies took control of the Quaffle. The Harpies flew towards the goals defended by the Cannons' Keeper in an Arrowhead formation. At the last moment, the lead Chaser tossed the Quaffle to the right. Ginny caught it and threw hard at the under protected right goal, hitting the ring with a light

glancing blow and sailing through for the first score of the game.

Ron sighed in disappointment. "It had to be Ginny who scored first on the Cannons, didn't it?" No one answered the rhetorical question, but everyone else in the box clapped and screamed for Ginny's goal.

"I think it's going to be a long game for you, Ron," Neville teased with a grin. He chuckled when Ron glared at him.

A little over two hours later, the Harpies Seeker caught the Golden Snitch and they won by 440 to 100. Ginny had scored 100 points, making Harry believe she had played extra hard to prove herself. Harry thought he would enjoy coming to all of her games. He also decided that he would try to make tonight a little extra special for her tonight, since it was her night to sleep with him.

(Apr 1999)

Gabrielle was going to her Charms class, her favorite, and was hoping the professor would give them more hints today about what would be on their OWLs this year.

As she and Jolien walked together and neared the classroom, Gabrielle suddenly felt what she could only vaguely describe as a wave of fever within her like she had never felt before. Groaning and clutching at her stomach, she fell to her knees as a wave of magic so intense swept through her, she almost transformed into her full Veela form, hanging on by the slimmest of margins.

«Gabrielle, what is it?» Jolien asked in panic, grabbing her taller friend's arm and sinking with her. «Do I need to get a teacher?»

Gabrielle blew out the breath she had been holding for a few seconds and gasped, «No, Harry. I need Harry.» This could only be one thing, she knew, and mentally cursed that it had to happen while she was at school instead of at home. Through the haze of magic,

pain, and desire, she finally remembered her special necklace given to her by the Headmistress. Forcing herself, she grabbed the golden necklace and ground out, "Veela Emergency," in English, created that way to protect it a little more.

She and Jolien, who was holding onto her friend tightly, were whisked away from the growing crowd in the corridor. A second later, they landed in the entry hall by the main bank of Flooes. Now, she just had to make Jolien let go of her, so she could use her bracelet to go to Harry. But Jolien would not let go and Gabrielle was afraid to try and make her lest she lose control and transform right there. She was so close to changing it was all she could do to mentally hold it in.

Jolien was scared for her friend. It was obvious to her that Gabrielle was in great pain. Try as she might, she could not seem to get her friend to stand so she could guide her to the school healer. Jolien had never realized how strong her friend was. Then she had been whisked via an inter-school Portkey, frightening her more. Worse, she could see no teacher here in the entry hall, only a few students. She screamed at them to get help, but they all seemed frozen to their places as the normally pretty girl curled in on herself and moaned pitifully on the floor.

Out of nowhere it seemed, a jet of red magic flew very close to her and hit Gabrielle. Turning and getting ready to fight for her friend, she saw Harry Potter striding hurriedly towards them and casting another spell on Gabrielle.

He grabbed a golden necklace around his neck and jerked it off, snapping the chain. When he reached them, he pulled the necklace from Gabrielle's hand and handed the matching necklaces to Jolien. «Give these to the Headmistress. They prove our identities. Tell her we will return as soon as we can, probably in four or five days.» Scooping his mate up, he stood and grabbed a silver necklace that he wore.

«Wait!» Jolien called and stood as well. «What's going on with her? Will she be all right?»

Gabrielle groaned and stirred slightly.

«I don't have time to explain, but this is a Veela matter and I must get her to a safe place before she fully wakes or people will get hurt. Pass the message to the Headmistress.» Harry then said a phrase no one around him understood, but they all saw him disappear with Gabrielle.

As Jolien stared in wonder at the place the two had just left from, loud footsteps ran up to her. Looking over, she saw the Headmistress. Not sure what else to do, she held out her hand with the two golden necklaces. «Gabrielle fell in pain and Portkeyed us here. Then Harry came and took her away, for four or five days he said.»

The Headmistress gently took the necklaces and touched her wand to each of them. Relieved by what she saw, she relaxed since first feeling the warning from the school wards of two Portkeys in the school proper. «Yes, that really was Harry. Do not worry, Mlle Duval, Gabrielle will be fine. However, please do not question her too much when she returns. She may consider it a sensitive matter.»

«Yes, Headmistress.» However, Jolien was still worried about her best friend.

— — —

Harry landed in the entrance parlor of Potter Manor and started walking as fast as he could, thankful for the Featherweight Charm he had cast on Gabi.

Dobby popped in before he could get to the double doors of the house and opened them quickly. "Master Harry, do I need to get a

healer for the Mistress?"

"No, Dobby, only I can help her. Run with me so we can talk. First, go to Paris and meet Hermione there in an hour. She'll call you to her and have some potions to give you that she's brewing now. Bring them back here. Second, in two hours, put a tray of food for two hungry people outside our bedroom door and put the box of potions with the food. Make it food that can stay fresh if we don't eat it for an hour or so later. Can you do that?"

Dobby was jogging beside Harry, keeping up quite well despite his much shorter legs. "Yes, Master Harry, I can do that."

Gabi started to stir, causing Harry to hurry up the stairs even faster. "And Dobby, lock the house and the Floo. Tell Remus before you go that the house is off limits until I say otherwise. If I have a need I'll call you. Please open the bedroom door and then close it after us. No matter what you hear in there, do not come in for any reason; you'll only get hurt."

"Yes, Master Harry," the elf said in wonder before he waved his hand and the doors to the master bedroom shot open.

Harry rushed into the bedroom and practically threw Gabrielle onto the bed before pulling a shrunken box of potions from a pocket and his wand to expand them to normal size. He also took Gabi's wand as the girl woke up; hers and his went on the nightstand along with the potions.

There was no mistaking the look of lust in Gabrielle's eyes and Harry wondered if she was even in control of herself anymore. When she ripped off her school uniform and threw away the shredded remains, he thought she was not and was acting on instinct alone.

Hastily, he drank one of the potions and then started removing his clothes. He had just removed his pants when the potion took affect

and almost doubled him over. The fire that shot through his body was both agonizing and thrilling. Looking at his hands and arms, he saw small feathers sprout as he felt energy and vitality course through him. Ripping his shirt off and making a sound he did not recognize, he now fully understood Jean-Aimé's warning. He would be having sex now with anyone who was here - his bond-mate or not, and if they could not handle him with his new found energy, strength, and sexual prowess, then they would suffer.

That was the last thought he was able to control before the fiery lust took over and he and Gabi sprung at each other in a speed Harry would not normally be able to accomplish.

- — —

Harry awoke with a warm, unconscious, and completely naked girl laying on him. Looking around, he saw three empty potion bottles on the floor. Searching through his memory, he decided that he did remember most of three or so hours of sex, even if they were a little hazy in a few places. The sight of a half destroyed bedroom helped him to remember a little more.

Looking over Gabrielle, he could not help the soft sigh that escaped him. He had hoped her puberty would not hit her until next fall, but Veela nature did not care about Harry's preferences - at least she looked as old as Ginny which helped his conscious greatly.

While he never ever verbally compared his mates on things they had no control over and minimized any other comparisons for the sake of preventing fights, in the quiet places of his mind, he did sometimes compare them.

There was no denying that Gabrielle was the most beautiful mate in an overall way, and that was without any influence of her Veela allure. Her lean and slightly tanned body was very pleasing to look at, not

perfect, but very pleasing.

Interestingly to him, despite what he had heard about Veela, the sex was not all that great. It was frenzied and rough, not something the normal man was capable of surviving and he knew the Veela did not give out that potion he took, which left him wondering for a moment how sex was supposed to normally work and why it was supposed to be so wonderful.

It took a moment, but he finally remembered Gabrielle telling him that her mother said that would change over time as Gabrielle learned to control herself, much like Gabrielle had had to learn how to control her Veela allure. Remembering more of that conversation, he mentally winced at the thought of the control taking a year or two to happen. It gave him a small appreciation of what Remus Lupin had to go through. Harry knew that he and Gabrielle would have to find a "safe place" to have sex for a while - unless...

With soft strokes down her back, Harry woke Gabrielle. She slowly looked around and finally looked at him, a pleased expression appearing. "Hi," he said softly.

"Hi," she returned before kissing him gently.

"I don't know about you, but I'm hungry. How about we take a very quick shower and then see what Dobby left for us?" he suggested. When she softly kissed him again, he added, "And I need to go."

She giggled and rolled off of him. "That's not very romantic."

"No, but it's the truth." He crawled out of bed and headed to the bathroom.

After taking care of his first need, he joined Gabrielle in the shower. She almost never took baths, like she did not like to swim in the pool, but the shower and the hot tub were enjoyed. He was not sure why a

bath was bad and the hot tub was good, but he suspected who was with her influenced that decision.

Harry retrieved the tray of food along with a small box that contained a dozen potions. He really hoped he did not need that many because if so, he wondered if he would survive.

Conjuring a table and two chairs, they sat down to eat wearing nothing. Harry was all too aware of how Gabrielle was watching him and thought that he would be needing another potion soon; therefore, he needed to broach a subject right now.

"Gabi, I think we need to try something different, something to help you learn control faster."

She picked up a croissant, buttered it, and began to nibble on it while looking at him with desire the entire time. "What did you have in mind?"

"I believe I know of a way to help you concentrate. It'll be hard, but I think it can lessen your desire enough for you to learn to control it," he proposed. "We can try it and you don't like it, we can stop; but I think it will help."

Delicately and almost seductively, she poked the last of the bread into her mouth with one finger, her eyes never leaving him. With a deep breath that drew his eyes to her bare breasts for a moment, she finally said, "All right, we can try it once and see if it works."

Guessing he did not have long until her desire took control over her and he would have to take a potion to defend himself, he told her, "Get your wand and repair the bed and as many other things as you can while I get ready."

Slowly, Gabrielle did as he directed, but she also worked to keep him in her vision, watching him when he bent over to search his trouser

pockets for something. Hiding a small box in his hand, he turned around to see that she had at least repaired the bed; the rest of the room still needed a lot of help.

"Put your wand down, lay on the bed, and close your eyes," he commanded her. As she did, he approached the bed. He could practically see her body twitch as it was nearing the point of automatically transforming again.

Quickly, he opened the box and pulled a small stone on a chain out. Dropping the box, he looped the necklace around his neck, causing the aqua stone to activate and Gabrielle's eyes to fly open as she gasped.

"Don't panic!" he commanded her firmly. "Take slow deep breaths and control yourself."

She looked at him with wide-eyes and fear. "No, take it off," she pleaded. "I need to transform! I need you!"

"Shush," he told her gently as he grabbed her hand. "Close your eyes and control the fire. You must win control, Gabrielle. You, not the Veela in you," he urged her. "Fight it," he ordered her. He struggled to now watch her chest as she took deep breaths, but watch her face as she fought her inner Veela. "Fight it," he said again as it looked like she was starting to win the battle.

"So - hard," she forced out.

"But you can do it," he encouraged her. Slowly he climbed on the bed and lay next to her. "We can have sex later without the stone sometimes, but we'll use the stone until you learn control. It worked for your allure."

"Hard - to - control. Make love - to me," she ground out.

Harry understood; she needed something to take her mind off the struggle. Rolling on top of her, he slowly made love to her and found out why sex with a Veela was so great.

- — —

As Harry finished repairing the bedroom for the last time and Gabrielle dressed to return, not in her destroyed school uniform but in clothes that had been left here, Harry had to smile and give a mental "Thank you" to Draco Malfoy for perhaps the one thing the little creep had ever done that was helpful. He still had no idea how Malfoy had obtained a Veela Control Stone, but Harry was glad he had found it and kept it. Gabrielle still was not in perfect control of herself during sex, but she could control herself most of the time now. So the use of the Stone was a success in both of their minds. He supposed he needed to give it to Apolline soon to be returned to the Veela colony.

Picking up the box of potions, Harry noted that there were still five left. He had no doubt they would use them in the coming months.

"Dobby?!" he called.

The elf popped in, although his eyes were closed as if afraid of what might be waiting there. "Yes, Master Harry?"

Harry chuckled and guessed the little guy had not appreciated all the noise he and Gabrielle had made. "We are leaving."

Dobby opened his eyes carefully and looked relieved when he saw Harry dressed normally.

"You may unlock the house and continue on as usual. All of us will return next weekend for our usual monthly visit."

"Thank you, sir, I'll be ready." Dobby sounded relieved also.

Guiding Gabrielle to the entry parlor, Harry activated his Portkey and they returned to France where his other two bond-mates greeted them, especially him, enthusiastically.

"Is everything all right?" Hermione asked. "You were gone two days beyond what you had planned. If Dobby hadn't sent me a note, we would have been worried."

"Yes, we're fine. It just took a little longer than anticipated to help Gabrielle learn to control herself. She mostly succeeded too," he praised her with a big smile, causing a light blush to the youngest. "How is everything here?"

"We're good," Ginny told him, "even if we have missed you - a lot."

He fully understood her message, given her coy look and a wiggled eyebrow. "I think that I need to take tonight off," Hermione and Ginny looked disappointed, "but then one of you can stay with me tomorrow and the other the night after. Then we can start our regular rotation again." Fortunately, the two accepted that.

"Harry? I do have an idea," Hermione told him, hesitantly.

"I like it as well," Ginny chimed in quickly.

"Let's hear it then," Harry said as he guided them into the living room. He took a seat in the chair near the fireplace, causing some disappointment from all the girls, but that was also why he had done it - to avoid favoritism at the moment.

"I've created some tokens," Hermione started as she pulled out a bag and dumped the contents on the low table in front of all the seats. She moved some of the white and red ones aside to pick up a brown one. "This would be for me," she said as she handed it to him.

Taking it, he noticed that it was wooden and about the size of a Galleon and had a small picture of Hermione on it. "I assume the red ones are for Ginny and the white ones are for Gabrielle?" At her nod, he pointed and asked, "What are the few black ones for?"

"Those are yours," she said.

"OK." Putting the token back on the table, he asked, "What are they for?"

"My idea was that you would hand them out at the beginning of the month. While we can keep our normal schedule for sleeping with you, these token also allow the three of us to trade nights and make sure it comes out fairly in the end.

"For example, if Ginny would like one of my nights, she comes to me, and if I agree to the trade, then she gives me one of her tokens and I give her one of mine. That way when she comes to you, you know that I've agreed with the trade because she has one of my tokens. Later in the month, I can take one of Ginny's nights by using the token she gave me."

Hermione paused and looked at Gabrielle for a moment. "We might want to make a few extra tokens for each of us to hold in reserve for special occasions. An example of that might be that because of Gabrielle's situation during the spring and fall, she might want to give up some of her nights before those periods to have some extra time when her cycle comes. That way it works out fairly in the long run."

"I see," Harry said thoughtfully, and he did understand the need for fairness. Their scheduling worked fine most of the time, but spontaneity suffered and he supposed this was one way to try to fix that - not that he had any better idea. This idea was so Hermione too, he mused. "How do the black ones work for me?"

"They are equivalent to your Sunday nights. I thought you could use that to indicate your choice for the night, like you do now. I suppose they don't mean much on Sundays, but it would be a way for you to override the schedule if you think it's needed."

"Another way to help spontaneity," he said, nodding. "I like it. I'm willing to try it. Gabrielle?"

She shrugged. "I'm willing to try but I don't know how well it will work for me. When I have needs, like this last week, there are limits to how much I can put it off. Mother said my control will get better, but there are still limits."

"We understand," Ginny told her and Hermione agreed. "I think this is an easy way for us to keep track to try to make it fair for all of us. I know we'd each like Harry to ourselves, but that's not possible. Besides," she said with a grin as she looked at the other girls, "there are periods that I'd willingly give up a few nights with Harry and gain them back later."

The other girls chuckled and Harry did his best to get that picture out of his head. Hermione had educated him more than he ever wanted to know about girls' monthly cycles.

"So," Harry jumped in quickly to change the topic, "are these all the tokens?"

"Yes," Hermione told him. "There are five extra for each of us that you can keep or hand out if you like the idea of a few extra."

"I do." Harry counted out five and twenty-eight for each girl as well as taking the four black ones for himself. "We can start with this on Monday for the next four weeks." With a grin, he said, "Hermione, since you came up with this, tomorrow night is yours and Ginny you get Sunday. But tonight, I need sleep as Gabi wore me out like she was on a honeymoon or something."

All the girls laughed at him as he had hoped they would. There were times he wished he had only one or two of them, but there was no way he could pick. He truly did love them all.

(Dec 1999)

Since Gabrielle did not get a trip for their "first time" as Hermione and Ginny did, Harry had arranged a few days during her Christmas break. Gabrielle had chosen Milan, so Harry made the arrangements and they spent their time there in the Muggle areas.

They were in a particularly upscale boutique and Gabrielle was having fun trying on dresses. They had a short runway and Harry sat in a chair at the end and gave his opinion on the choices. It was a lot of fun, but he was also glad his bank account could handle this.

Gabrielle came out in yet another dress, this time with a narrow fur around her neck to dress it up. She laughed as she sauntered down the foot high runway from the back area. There were a couple of others in the shop, but neither Harry nor Gabrielle worried about them.

Harry laughed at her attempt to walk the runway. "If you are going to do it, really try," he called to her. Not only did they not care about the other potential customers, they did not worry about the manager. The small stack of expensive dresses on the "to buy rack" guaranteed there were no arguments.

«Very well,» Gabrielle said, using French because she thought it fit better here. She grabbed a hat off the rack and walked to the back to find a mirror. A moment later, she came out with the hat stylishly tilted and wearing pair of three inch heels strutting to the best of her ability, just like models she had seen in another store the previous day. She stopped at the end in front of Harry and twirled a few times, giving him a look.

He gave her an appreciative look and a soft clap. "Much better," he told her with a soft chuckle. "I like it, but I think that if you want that outfit that you'll need to put one of the others back."

She purposefully gave him a pout as she slowly twirled again and did a few poses. «But I like this one too.»

"If I said yes, then where would you stop?" he asked playfully.

Gabrielle harrumphed and turned, strutting to the back and moving her hips as much as possible.

"Damn she's good," he murmured to himself. He looked up to find the manager but saw one of the other customers with a professional looking camera taking pictures of Gabrielle. "Hey!" he called out as he jumped up. "What do you think you are doing?"

The middle-aged man pulled the camera down and stepped back quickly at Harry's angry look.

"Please, I am not trying to hurt either of you!» he said hastily.

The raised voices brought the manager over very quickly. "Monsieurs, please!"

"I demand the film!» Harry knew they were in a public place, but he still felt their privacy had been violated.

«Please, Monsieur, I can explain and it will be to your benefit.» When Harry did not stop him, the man hurriedly continued in rapid French. «My name is Claude Dumont and I am a photographer for several fashion agencies. I was here to look at a new line I was to photograph soon when I saw the Mademoiselle and I said to myself that she could be a model. So I took a few pictures to show to my agency. I had planned to tell you and get your permission before

either of us left, but you did not give me a chance.» At Harry's still less than trusting look, he added, «I promise.»

Harry looked over his shoulder and saw Gabrielle standing at the curtain and looking at them. She did not look like she knew if she trusted him, but she also looked very interested. He turned to the manager. "Can you vouch for him?"

"Yes, Monsieur Potter. Monsieur Dumont is who and what he says he is. He is to perform a shoot for us next week."

Harry considered that she was trying to calm them both, but he could also tell that she was very concerned. If the man was about to try to promote their business, she needed him. Yet, Harry was about to make a large purchase also. He gave a small wave to Gabrielle so she would come over. "Madame, thank you for your verification. Perhaps you could start to ring up the four purchases?"

Gabrielle looked very pleased to hear him say that, as did the store manager.

Turning to the man, he did his best to present an apologetic look. «My apologies, M Dumont, I'm afraid you surprised me greatly and I overreacted. Please forgive me for acting rudely.»

«I will, if you will forgive me also,» the photographer said with a small nod. «I'm afraid that I forgot I was not shooting a model and was photographing someone without permission.»

«Yes, of course,» Harry said with as much conciliation as the other man had. «I am Harry Potter and this is Gabrielle Delacour.» They shook hands.

Dumont looked at Gabrielle. «Mademoiselle, even though you are not a professional, you modeled very well and you have a look about you that screams model to me. Have you considered being one?»

Harry was amazed that Gabrielle managed to control her allure as her smile practically lit the room.

«Yes, M Dumont, I have. I enjoy fashion and thought the girls looked so sophisticated on the runway,» she gushed.

Dumont chuckled. «There is more to modeling than walking a runway, Mademoiselle. If you would care to spend a few minutes with me,» he turned to Harry, «and if Monsieur would permit, I will take a few more photographs of you and submit them to my best agency. Perhaps they will give you a call for an interview.»

«May I?» she asked Harry enthusiastically.

There was no way he could deny her this based on how happy she looked. She really had talked about modeling in the past. Turning, he saw the store manager at his elbow again. "Madame, may we borrow your runway a little longer?"

The manager looked very pleased. "Of course! Perhaps we can provide you with some refreshments while you watch? Maybe something else will strike your fancy as she is photographed."

Harry smiled, fully aware of what she was hoping for. Still, he did appreciate what she was doing. Then again, with what he was about to spend there, she should be very pleasant to them. "Thank you."

Ordering a drink, Harry took a seat to watch an impromptu fashion show. Dumont selected several outfits and gave them to Gabrielle, who modeling them while he took pictures. After the show, Harry purchased only the four outfits while Gabrielle exchanged contact information with Dumont. Harry also made arrangements to meet the man later for a copy of the photos.

Two weeks later, Gabrielle had a job as a part-time model due to her

still being in school and Harry had what he considered to be some very "hot" photos of Gabrielle.

(Mar 2000)

Dobby handed Harry two envelopes after they returned to Potter Manor. Harry noticed one with his name on it and one with Hermione's. Based on the return address, the same on both, he had a good idea what these were. Quietly, he handed the other to his first wife. Gabrielle was at school and Ginny at Quidditch practice.

Hermione was almost holding her breath as she stared at the envelope in her trembling hands.

"Go ahead and open it," he told her, almost laughing as she had been this very same way after OWLs and NEWTs and their A-Levels. He quickly ripped his open and scanned it, careful to keep a neutral expression.

After a long moment of just staring at it, she opened the envelope and quickly read the letter. She gave a happy scream and launched herself at Harry, kissing him soundly, something he was happy to deal with.

"I knew you would do it!" he told her and laughed at her sudden bashfulness.

"Well, it's not like I got accepted to Oxford or Ecole Normale Supérieure," she reminded him. "It's only a preparatory university." She noticed the opened letter in his hands. "Wait, you've opened yours already and you haven't said anything. Harry?!"

He chuckled and said, "Yes, I was accepted too."

She kissed him again. "I'm glad we both made it. I think I'm still a little surprised you want to come to a university with me."

"As I've pointed out, how else am I to learn real engineering? Besides, you know how much I enjoy spending time with you."

Hermione moved into his lap and held him tightly. "It will be fun and we can take all of the core courses together. I don't expect you to have as many chemistry classes as I will have."

"No," he replied with a grin, "just as I don't expect you to have as many engineering classes as I will have. I still don't know that I'll finish the full degree, but I want at least two or three years so I have a good foundation for when I want to apply that to magical construction."

"Harry," she said with a hint of exasperation, "if you're going to take three years of courses, you might as well take the fourth and finish it all."

"I probably will, but we'll see." He kissed her quickly and then helped her up. "Let's go tell Nick and Nelle. I know Nick will want to coordinate what I take with our project. Simmons says the house-sized generators are working and selling well to the Squibs. Between he, Nick, and me, I think we'll be able to shield electronics to work around magic very soon, probably before the end of summer."

"I can hardly wait," she told him. "I think Nick's idea of putting all his books on a computer to make research faster will really help us to learn more quickly as it will be far easier and faster to find information."

"I know," he agreed. "How's your Alchemy lessons going? I don't think you've told me lately."

"They are a little frustrating at times, but I think I'm starting to get a good grip on it. The approach is just so different from Potions at

times."

Harry smiled at her. "But I know you'll get that too and I'm looking forward to seeing how you combine Potions, Alchemy, and Chemistry."

(Aug 2000)

At the end of August, several major changes happened to the Potters.

To Madame Maxime's disappointment, Gabrielle decided not to return to Beauxbatons for her last year. While Gabrielle had completed several modeling jobs during the spring term last school year, the summer had been very good for kicking her career into high gear. She was now starting to be in such high demand as "a new talent", that she decided not to return to school, but to study on her own so she could work. She still planned to take her NEWTs next June though.

Ginny was doing very well with the Holyhead Harpies. Her time traveling, when she could not come home in the evenings, gave her the opportunity to study advanced charms with Nelle's instructions and be able to take the tests for being a Medi-witch, as Madam Pomfrey was. Ginny had no plans to do such a job, she merely wanted the knowledge to understand the human body better. She also started reading various Muggle medical texts. Ginny would not attend a Muggle university, but she understood that Muggle medical information could be useful to her. She did want to become the magical equivalent of a Muggle physical therapist one day, preferably to Quidditch teams.

Just before Hermione and Harry were to start university in Paris, where they were Apparate to every day before returning to stay with the Flamel's in the evening, Nick called the four together.

"I thought you might like to see Hermione's project, sort of her final exam in Alchemy," Nick said with a smile.

Hermione looked very surprised at that.

"This will take about an hour, but I think you'll like the end result. Conjure a comfortable chair if you like. Hermione, please retrieve all the projects that we've put on your shelf." Nick grabbed a small caldron from a shelf and put it on a stand over a fire. The caldron was of the style that did not have a lip at the top.

While the others watched, Nelle joined them too and brought drinks. Nick directed Hermione on how to combine her other projects together. Along the way, he had Harry and Gabrielle each add seven drops of blood into the small caldron that was being used.

When the last of the work was done and the mixture was heating, covered with a lid, Nick turned to his student. "Do you understand what is happening, Hermione?"

Harry was surprised to see her worrying her lower lip as she said almost fearfully, "I think so." Hermione looked between Nick and Nelle. "Are you sure?" The other three bond-mates tried to work out the puzzle and failed.

Nick conjured a chair for Hermione and himself so they could all sit. He looked at all four of them very seriously. "While I have told you that you may stay here for the next several years as you like, your major time of learning has come to an end. We'll always do our best to answer questions and help you, and we may even work on other projects together in the future." He looked at Harry with a smile as their project of magic and electronics was indeed at place where there were many exciting possibilities before them.

"But you have each accomplished your initial goal that you came here with, except perhaps for Gabrielle who did not really have one.

Still, even she is ready to take two of her NEWTs a year early." Nick and Nelle smiled fondly at the younger Veela who blushed slightly at the praise.

"And I hope you will think of me as a close aunt," Nelle told her. Gabrielle nodded vigorously.

Nick glanced at the hourglass timer. "During this time, we have observed you, not only for magic and intellect, but for moral character. Hermione's final project is our gift to you and the Wizarding World as a thank you for being the good people you are. We have never done this before and will probably never do it again." With a smile he added, "The circumstances will probably never happen again."

"I don't understand," Harry said, looking at both of his mentors.

"Hermione?" Nick beckoned to her.

With more uncertainty than Harry had ever seen in her before, she meekly said, "I believe he's trying to say that he's allowed me to make a Philosopher's Stone."

Harry just blinked for a moment in shock. Slowly he looked around and saw that Ginny and Gabrielle seemed to be just as shocked. Nick and Nelle were smiling and Nick was also nodding.

"It's true," Nick told them. "We have judged you worthy of receiving this. When the time comes, use it to extend your life, do good and help others to do good, and push the boundaries of knowledge to help mankind, magical and non-magical."

"But, why us?" Harry asked. "Surely there are other good people who deserve this more."

Nick chuckled as he looked at Nelle. "Surprisingly, I doubt there are many that are more deserving of this than you and your family, Harry.

Your modesty is one of your better qualities, in my opinion."

"There is also the fact," Nelle took over, "that your family is probably the only ones alive today that could make this Stone. We required you to pass a morality test over time by living with us to ensure you wouldn't abuse the power, or at least that you wouldn't be likely to as no one can truly predict the future. However, there is also a magical requirement for creating the Stone." When no one said anything, she looked at Hermione.

"It takes a Veela and a man with the Rescue Bond, doesn't it? That's what we have in common." Hermione looked to Nick.

"You are correct."

"But what about Ginny and Hermione?" Harry asked quickly, an edge of fear in his voice.

Nick looked at all of them kindly. "Have no fear, Harry. The creation process requires Veela blood that is in the bond, however, the magic of the Stone is tied to your magic. Therefore, it will work for all of your young ladies too."

The four practically sagged with relief, none of them desiring to go insane if one or two of them should die early.

"So gold and long life?" Harry asked. "I don't really need the gold, but I can see how being richer could allow me to do more good."

Nelle let out a full laugh while Nick looked chagrined. None of the bond-mates could understand the humor.

"No, Harry," Nick finally said a little sheepishly, "you only get the Elixir of Life from it. The tale of it being able to turn lead into gold is false and one that I made up one night shortly after I had created it and become drunk. I wasn't quite in my right mind and made that up

because it sounded more impressive and was the 'Holy Grail' of Alchemy. Unfortunately, that claim stuck. If you want to know the secret of my wealth, the answer is compound interest," he ended with a smile.

"A reasonable nest egg with a good interest rate can accomplish a lot in a hundred years - and longer," Nelle said with a wide smile.

"Hermione, if you would, please put cold water in one of the larger caldrons. When your timer goes off in a minute or two, stop the flame and drop the small caldron into the bigger caldron to cool it rapidly." While she did that, Nick looked back at Harry.

"There are a few things you must know and promise." When Harry nodded, Nick continued. "First, don't share how to make one of these with anyone." He looked at Hermione who agreed after she put the small caldron in the cold water. "There's no need to tempt anyone. If my statement wasn't clear before, the Stone will only work for you as it's tuned to the magic of the bond.

"Second, you have many years before you have to do this, but start thinking about how you plan to span the centuries and avoid detection. We do it by having at least four properties that are in different countries with different identities, plus a private island where we can be totally alone. We normally live until we are in our eighties, move to the private island to de-age, then move to and live in the next property. We always return to the island for a few months to de-age so no one can see that process. That's also a good plan because it makes us very cranky during that short time. Be sure to give yourself plenty of space and make sure one of Gabrielle's cycles won't be during that time."

"Please believe me that you don't want that," Nelle added - very seriously.

"Third, please understand the Stone doesn't make your immortal.

You can still be killed just like everyone else. It can heal you from near-fatal wounds as well as de-age you, but if you're walking down the street and a large vehicle runs over you, you're dead and the Stone won't bring you back.

"Lastly, you must not take the Elixir of Life before you are absolutely sure you have finished having children. The longevity of life does not come for free; its cost is your ability to have children. However, since you probably have no need to de-age for at least fifty years, which is past normal child-bearing years, then you should not have a problem. You should also be aware that any Elixir that is brewed has a shelf life of only one year; after that it becomes highly poisonous."

"However," Nelle took over again, "if you have a major injury and think you need the Elixir of Life to stay alive and you're still young, keep this in mind. Being sterile and alive is better than being dead if you still want to be together. Also, the Veela have a spell to break a bond. Learn it so that you can remove someone who is ready to move on or who is about to die and you can't save them. It is better for the removal to be controlled than for that person to be torn out."

"We are aware of that spell," Harry admitted. "We'll all learn it just in case it's needed because of an accident."

Satisfied, Nick turned to Hermione. "I believe it's cool enough now. Pull the small caldron out and turn it over onto the workbench. When she did, they heard a thunk and a sound like glass breaking. Hermione looked at her mentor in alarm. He chuckled at her. "Yes, I thought I had ruined it the first time as well. Slide the caldron up."

They all saw red stuff like broken glass fall out, but sticking up through the top of the pile was the end of a large dark red crystal. Hermione carefully pulled it out and they looked at it in wonder.

"Store it in a safe place that only you know about," Nick advised. "Boil it in one cup of water for seven minutes and you'll have the Elixir. If

you do the same work but Harry and Gabrielle only add three drops of blood instead of seven, you'll have a Stone that is the best fake possible as it'll register as magical but it won't work."

"We won't let you down," Harry told them as he went over to hug both of his mentors. Each of the girls repeated the promise and hugged the Flamels. They would keep in contact over the years.

(Dec 2000)

For the third time, Harry stood in front of the same set of people with Madam Maxime at his right. Philip was at his left as best man again; Neville completed his side.

Hermione came up the aisle as matron of honor. Each girl had now been bride and best maid/matron once.

Gabrielle walked through the door, escorted by her father, and looked radiant - literally. In fact, Harry noticed many of the male guests struggling as she approached him. Fortunately, her father noticed it too and whispered to her. The men all relaxed a great deal after that.

After the wedding, he and Gabrielle would travel to his godfather's private island for a week. Harry had completely forgotten about it when the man had mentioned it some time back, but Gabrielle had not. He assumed she desired that location so they could be unrestrained in their Veela forms, or potion-induced form for him.

Gabrielle was very beautiful, Harry thought yet again as she joined him and the Headmistress started the joining.

(Oct 2002)

Harry, Hermione, and Gabrielle were sitting in the Potter box watching Ginny help lead the Harpies against the Vultures. The Vultures were being their usual nasty self, reminding Harry of playing

the Slytherins when he was at Hogwarts.

Ginny had the second most experience of the starting Chasers and vied for being the leading scorer on the team. She was doing a very good job, having made two more goals than the lead Chaser tonight. It was her fifth season and she was a popular player.

Harry thought she cut a good figure as she flew, energetic and yet still very attractive. He enjoyed watching her play as well as the time to relax and talk with the other two women in his life. Tonight, it was just the three of them, no extra friends. Knowing how pumped up Ginny would be after the game, he was really looking forward to taking her home afterwards. Assuming it was not an extra-long game that tired her out, it was usually the time for the most enjoyable sex between them.

The game had been going for nearly an hour when Harry suddenly saw a formation that concerned him greatly. While it was legal, most teams did not do it for the sport of the game, but the opponent was the Vultures who had no real scruples.

"Shit!" he exclaimed as he saw one of the Vulture Beater draw his bat back while one of his team mates flew in front of him as they drew near the Harpies' leading scorer for the night - Ginny. His exclamation and hasty pulling his wand out had the other two doing the same as the Beater took a point-blank shot at Ginny as the Vulture team mate flying in front veered away. The only purpose of this play, and why most teams did not do this, was to take a player out of the game by injury. There was no break-up of a play or defensive attempted; this was to purposefully injury someone and usually very badly. There had even been deaths in the past from this play.

Being the professional she was, Ginny realized what was happening at the crack of the bat and attempted to twist and dive despite the close distance to the Beater and Bludger. Instead of hitting her

square in the small of the back, the Bludger hit her hard on the left shoulder blade - the same place she was accidentally hit in her fifth year at Beauxbatons.

Knowing there were supposed to be two people assigned to watch the game from the ground and catch any players knocked off their brooms to prevent serious injury, yet unwilling to trust they were paying close attention, Harry cast a spell that slowed Ginny down, Hermione and Gabrielle each cast another spell at their sister-wife, and then Harry cast once more just before she hit the ground and bounced to a halt.

Without waiting, Harry put his wand away and raced from his box and towards the team rooms where he knew Ginny would be taken. Hermione and Gabrielle were right behind him as he took the stairs two at a time from his box near the top of the stadium. Because he still kept up his physical exercises, Harry arrived at the locker room not breathing hard.

"Stop, you can't go any farther," a security guard at the main door to the locker rooms told him.

"My name is Harry Potter and they just brought Ginny Potter in here. She's my wife and I need to see her now." He could feel her direction was right in front of him as well as the fact that she had been in pain.

"I'm sorry, but no one who is not on the team is allowed in," the guard told him.

"I don't think you understand," the anger in Harry's voice becoming more noticeable. "My wife is injured and in there and I'm going in. Step aside!"

The security guard moved to pull his wand out but Harry was faster and dropped him with a Stunning spell before the man's wand was clear of his holster. A couple of unlocking charms caused the door to

open and Harry strode through wand still in hand.

A moment later, Harry hurried into the main examination room. He stopped so quickly that Gabrielle almost ran into him. Putting his wand away, he hurried over to Ginny who was lying face down on a table, the back of her uniform cut away with the remains hanging over the side. A healer was on each side of the table working on her.

"Ginny!" he called and hurried over.

"Harry?" she returned, although not in her usual energetic and playful manner.

The healers looked over at him and the shorter one addressed him. "Mr Potter, please don't interrupt us as we're trying to help her. You can sit on the floor and talk to her if you want, but don't interfere if you want her healed correctly. This is very delicate."

"Of course," he instantly agreed as he came to her head. He saw the healers very carefully doing spells to her back and the something under her skin moving around. Not wanting to see more, he dropped down and sat cross-legged on the floor and looked up into her face, or what little he could see of it through the hole in the support that held her head. Her arms also hung over the side as if she was meant to hug the table.

"How are you?" He instantly closed his eyes and grunted. "Sorry, stupid question."

Hermione and Gabrielle chuckled at him as they created seats behind him as they waited too.

Ginny actually smiled at him. "I'm not too bad now as I can't feel a thing in my back. It hurt like hell a few minutes ago."

"Do you know what's wrong and how long you'll be here?"

Before she could answer, one of the healers did. "Her left shoulder blade is shattered and there are a few ribs that are broken. We've already Vanished the shoulder blade and are working on the ribs. We're having to go slowly so we don't puncture any internal organs. We should be done with that in an hour or so and then we'll give her Skel-Gro for the shoulder blade. She'll be here overnight and can go home in the morning. You're welcome to conjure a cot and stay with her if you'd like, although the other ladies really should return home."

"How did you get in here anyway?" the other healer asked. "I thought there was normally a security person outside."

"I object to his stopping me from coming in," Harry explained, a little embarrassed now that he was calming down a little. "I'm sure he'll wake up soon."

"I did lock the door after us," Hermione added.

Both healers chuckled and resumed working.

"Harry?"

"Yes Ginny?"

"Do you know why I didn't crash into the ground? That was the strangest fall I've ever had, and I've had several. I didn't hit nearly as hard as I expected to and I'd swear I bounced."

"I, uh, I might have helped with that," he admitted sheepishly.

"Oh?"

"You see, I saw what was about to happen before it did, so I had time to pull out my wand and had cast Arresto Momentum right as you were falling off your broom," he explained.

Hermione spoke up. "I cast a Cushioning Charm on you, so no matter which way you landed you'd have padding."

"I cast a Cushioning Charm on the ground," Gabrielle said.

"And I cast yet another Cushing Charm on top of her charm," Harry finished up.

"Uh, wow, thanks," Ginny said in awe.

"Good work," the first healer said. "If you hadn't broken her fall like that, she would be in very bad shape right now. The best one was the Arresto Momentum before she started building up speed from her fall."

"I'll find a nice thank you for that when we get home," Ginny promised him, adding a mimed kiss.

"I'm sorry, Mrs Potter," the second healer said, "but you'll have to wait a couple of days for anything other than resting, Tuesday night at the earliest. After that, protect this shoulder at all costs for the next two months. No Bludgers or major falls. That means you're out for the rest of the season. You should start light exercise after one week and build slowly. If you experience any pain, stop whatever you're doing immediately and see a healer."

Ginny sighed, "Fine, I understand."

"Mrs Potter, if you follow my directions, your shoulder will be as good as new in two months. But if you re-injure it, there is a good chance you will lose functionality in this shoulder - permanently. Of course, it's your choice."

"She will take it easy as you've suggested," Harry told the healers. They chuckled when Ginny did not protest.

A few minutes later, Ginny broke the silence of the bond-mates (the healers were still working quietly). "Hermione?"

"Yes, Ginny?"

"It's been five years since we've finished school. This is the second time I've been injured badly with a Bludger and I don't think I want to wait for a third time. According to our agreement, you'd be first in all major events - if possible."

Harry was surprised at that revelation as he had not heard of it before. It made sense to him that they might have an arrangement like that, but he was still surprised to hear it.

"I'm giving you notice. If you want to be the first to have a baby, you have one year to get pregnant. I'll stop taking my potion a year from now if you're not pregnant, or the month after you give birth to your baby. I don't think I'm going to play anymore and I'm ready to have children."

It was all Harry could do to breathe after Ginny's announcement. He wanted children, badly at times, but the reality of it left him somewhat breathless.

Hermione's chair creaked slightly, the only sound in the room. Even the healers had stopped working for a moment when they heard Ginny. It was not a secret in Britain that Harry Potter had three wives and who they were, but no one really knew how they made that work and the healers were the first to see a glimpse of that.

"Very well," Hermione said quietly, her chair creaking again as she shifted; the healers resumed working too. "I had hoped to finish my degree before having a child, but perhaps with a little extra effort, I can finish a semester early. Are you sure?" she asked Ginny.

"Yes. I think I'll pursue being a physical therapist, or maybe a personal trainer. Maybe I'll use this time to try both to see what I want later, but I'm sure I'm ready to start being a mum."

"Ginny? I believe you're forgetting something very important," Hermione said.

"Wha- Oh, crap, you're right. Harry, I'm sorry for trying to do this without talking to you first. I really messed up. Are you all right with becoming a father in the next year?" Ginny asked with hope.

Harry swallowed as he continued to think through the idea.

"Harry?" Ginny asked again, a little worriedly this time, when he did not say anything.

"Uh, yeah, I think I am ready," he said slowly. "I mean I know I want children, with all of you, but it's suddenly becoming very real."

"We can talk about it more later when we get home. I'd like to have some soon, but I'll wait until you're ready, Harry," Ginny promised, deferring to him.

"I think it's a wonderful idea, Ginny," he assured her. "I just need a little time to get used to it."

A little while later, the Harpies captain and coach came in to check on Ginny. They were not happy to hear that Ginny was out for the rest of the season, but since they had seen the fall she had taken, they were not surprised. They were surprised by her resignation from the team after this season. Ginny promised to help in any way she could when the healers allowed her too. She thought this seemed like a good time to work with the team to get some experience as a trainer.

(Sep 2003)

Harry finished buttoning his shirt as he walked out of his bedroom at Potter Manor. It was almost time to leave and go to The Burrow for the Weasley summer family reunion, which had been delayed until early September this year. The Potters did not go over very often and never stayed overnight, but Harry had forgiven Molly (although he was still a little wary of her) and he knew Arthur enjoyed seeing everyone. He thought Ginny had forgiven her mother and knew she was definitely wary of her mother.

Hearing a sound that was almost like a sob from Hermione's room made him stop to check on her. She had been a little moody the last few weeks.

"Hermione?" he called as he poked his head through the doorway. He saw her dab a handkerchief at an eye before she looked up quickly, plastering an obviously forced smile on her face.

"I'll be ready to go in a few minutes," she told him, not quite sounding like her normal self.

Suppressing a sigh, Harry walked over and sat down next to her on the bed. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing important," she replied hurriedly and shook her head, trying to end it there.

"I've been concerned about you lately," he said, hoping that would start her talking; it did not. While he contemplated what to do next, Ginny stuck her head in the door.

"I've got everything together. Are you ready?"

"I don't think so," Harry said slowly as he looked at Hermione in concern. "Please see that everyone else makes it there when you're able and we'll join you in a little while. If they ask, tell them that I needed to take care of something for the ranch before I came and

Hermione is helping me. We shouldn't be long."

Hermione gave him an inquisitive look while Ginny said told him, "Sure", along with a knowing smirk before she walked away.

"But..."

"Shush, you know Ginny will take care of everything just fine. Now that it's just the two of us," Harry pinned Hermione with a stern look, "what's the problem? Have I done something stupid again, or have I not been paying enough attention to you?"

"No, Harry," she hastily told him as she looked down at her hands. "It's not you. You've been great, honestly."

"Then what?" he asked again, as gently as he could.

She took a deep breath as she picked at a nail for a moment. Finally, she said, "I'm just unhappy and I don't know why. I mean, everything feels wrong. I can't concentrate like I want. My hair refuses to cooperate. I cry when I don't want to. And, and I'm so fat I can't fit into any of my clothes..." She lost her composure and pulled into herself, a tear starting to leak.

Harry pulled her to him and did his best to comfort her, letting her cry on his shoulder for a few minutes. He did his best to use that time to determine what to tell her. As she started to settle down, he rubbed her back some more and played with her hair with his other hand.

"Hermione, my Mia. I know things aren't perfect for you and we knew life wouldn't always be perfect, but there's so much that's right and wonderful too."

She sniffled and said, "I know, she's so wonderful, but the rest..."

"Mia, you have to look at everything. You're in the prime of your life.

You've got a degree from a good university and from Hogwarts. You're so knowledgeable about so many things it makes my head hurt when I think about it." He heard a snort of a chuckle from her and took that as a good sign.

"You're a wonder person and wife; someone I truly love being with." He stroked her hair again. "I do love what you've done to your hair. This longer style helps it and I like how you've made it a darker brown. As for being fat, I don't think so. So you're a dress size bigger..."

"A dress size?!" she refuted firmly and with exasperation, "Try three dress sizes!"

"I don't think so, but I also know you won't stay this way because I know you've already started working with Ginny as your personal trainer to help that."

Hermione gasped. "She told you?!"

"No," Harry told her gently, also putting two fingers over her lips so she would not argue, something he had learned to do after many arguments so he could make his full point. "She has not told me nor would I expect her to break your confidence. You forget this is Potter Manor and as the head of house I know many things here. I wouldn't have told you if I didn't think it would help. I don't share secrets between you three, you know that."

Chastised, Hermione nodded. "I know, but I just wanted to fix this."

"And you will," he assured her. "But you should also know that I love you just as you are."

"With me being this fat?" Hermione harrumphed. "Maybe if I had Ginny's derrière or looked like Gabrielle."

Harry snorted at the idea and shook his head in disbelief. Surely

Hermione was not comparing herself to them again, was she?

He would be the first to admit that Ginny had won life's lottery for great legs and a practically perfect derrière. In fact, one time he could not accompany Gabrielle on one of her photo shoots for clothes and Ginny had, and it happened to be a shoot for jeans, the photographer would not believe that Ginny was not one of the models until someone showed him a list of the models and Ginny's name was not on it. That had made Ginny week.

Gabrielle was a Veela and had the genes to make her very nice looking in an overall way. While he thought Ginny had a better derrière than Gabrielle, Gabrielle was perfectly proportioned. Also at five-ten, Gabrielle had the tall frame required to become a top model. Between her looks, height, and a great presence in front of the camera, she was a highly desired model.

"Hermione," he said softly, then lifted her chin to look at him when she did not respond. "You are a great person and very pretty in some ways that the others are not."

"I have a great mind," she snapped and tried to look away, but Harry held her face in place.

"You do. You're also very caring about other, especially those that are less fortunate. However, you also have the best breasts and have a face that every man loves." At her surprised look, he smiled. "You have the classic 'girl next door' look, someone who's innocent and carefree and wholesomely wonderful. If we used my cousin Nymphadora to build the perfect girl, she'd have to wear your face."

He studied her for a moment. "You still don't believe me that I find you desirable, do you?"

"I want to, but not completely."

An idea came to him and he could not think of a better way to get his point across quicker. To his good fortune, she was wearing a skirt. "Stand up then and let me show you."

She gave him a questioning and doubtful look, but stood anyway. Since he was still sitting, it was easy for him to reach up under her skirt and grab her knickers, pulling them down swiftly. "Harry!" she shrieked, starting to fight him to pull them back up.

When her knickers were around her ankles, Harry pulled her back to the bed and started to tickle her, causing her to shriek even more. Somehow, he managed to loosen his trousers, do a couple of quick Banishing spells to remove a few more articles of clothing, and a few minutes later Hermione was groaning in pleasure and calling "Harry" encouragingly.

Less than five minutes later, both were on their back breathing heavily - neither had anything on below the waist.

Rolling to one elbow, he leaned over her and kissed her gently. "If I didn't think you were wonderful, would I do that and feel so good now?" He dared her to answer anything other than "no".

She threaded a hand into his hair and caressed his head for a moment. "I've never doubted your love, Harry."

"Then do not doubt that I love you as you are, including right now."

After a moment, she nodded. "All right. It's hard sometimes, but I won't doubt you like that again."

He kissed her gently again. "You'll do what you need to do. I don't think you've ever failed on anything you really put your mind to." He almost did not tell her, but decided that he probably needed to. "This may sound like I'm making fun of you, but have patience; a century or two may change things greatly."

"What?" she asked with a furrowed brow.

"You can't tell anyone this and I probably won't tell Ginny for at least fifty years, but some of our difficulties may go away in a century or two." He moved a few hairs away from her eyes. "There's a good possibility that Gabrielle will never take the Elixir of Life or might not more than once."

Hermione shot up to a sitting position. "But why not? It would make her youthful again."

"It would, but Nelle told me, and you can't tell anyone this either, but age does things to Veela. If you remember Apolline told us that Veela were vain. That even extends to never wanting to look or feel old. The Elixir fixes that, but Veela as a whole tend not to want to use it for some reason. It's like it goes against how they think or view the world. Nelle said she almost did not take it and Nick had to force her the first time. She said she's asked a lot of Veela about it over the years and most say they'd rather just die. In fact, she told me to watch Gabrielle very carefully as she became older, because many Veela commit suicide to avoid becoming too old looking."

"That's..." Hermione could not finish the horrible thought.

"Shocking and worse," Harry finished for her. "I know, but it's what Nelle said. She also said it would take a very unusual Veela to want to live for centuries."

"But Nelle has," Hermione reminded him.

"She has, but she also told me that most Veela would consider her strange." Harry shrugged. "It might not happen, but eventually we'll need to practice the Bond Removal spell just in case Gabrielle decides she doesn't want to live anymore."

"It doesn't have to be that way, we can help her," Hermione rushed to get out, as if determined to go find a way right now.

"We will try to help her," Harry assured Hermione, "but if she, or anyone of you, want out badly enough, I'm going to have to let go. It's your life. I am your husband, not a slave master." He watched her work through that thought, just as he had to originally.

"I don't like it," she said finally, "but I see your point." She looked up and smiled slightly. "It would be easier with only two of us."

"Yes it would, but as I've said before, now that each of you are with me, who could I possibly tell to go away or that I don't love you anymore? It's difficult with three wives, but you're each special and I'm glad you're with me, so there's no way I'd voluntarily give any of you up."

Hermione nodded. "I know." She looked over and saw their clothes strewn on the floor and smiled. "We should get dressed again and go before they start to wonder why we're so late."

Harry chuckled. "I'm sure they've already wondered, but stick to the story; they don't need any details."

After getting ready again, they Apparated into the back garden of The Burrow. Hermione immediately walked over to the group of girls who were crowded around Ginny. The redhead gave the little brunette bundle over to her mother. The girls each told Hermione what a cute baby Rose was as they gave Hermione a hug in greeting. Even Victoria, Bill and Fleur's only daughter so far, seemed happy to see the baby.

Pleased at the loving sight, Harry walked over to see Bill, Ron, and Fleur, who were talking together not far away.

"Hey, Harry!" Ron called out.

Harry greeted them all.

"Rose is so cute," Fleur told him. "She is ... seven weeks old?"

"Eight," he corrected, "and thanks, we all think she's cute too."

The group of girls - one for every Weasley boy except Fleur, three for Harry, and Molly - suddenly let out a scream and they all seemed to attack Ginny with hugs.

Bill looked at Harry. "Let me guess, Ginny's pregnant?"

"She is, almost a month along. We found out yesterday that it's a boy," Harry said grinning that magical smile that most new fathers had.

"Congratulations!" Fleur said as she gave him a hug, then left quickly to go join the group of girls.

"Better you than me," Ron said, shaking his head.

Bill and Harry laughed, although Harry had the faster quip. "Ron, you are engaged and most married couples have at least one child eventually, so this will happen to you too."

"I know," Ron said and waved the idea away, "but not anytime soon."

"What does Lavender say about that?" Bill asked, looking at the young witch that was happily talking to Gabrielle.

"She's doing well in her modeling career. Not as well as Gabrielle," he added hastily, "but she's doing well enough."

"Are you sure you're going to get married in a few months?" Harry asked him, seriously.

"I am," Ron replied, just as seriously. "I'm not always sure why she likes me, but we do get along quite well."

"How's your job?" Harry asked him.

Ron brightened and looked like he had more energy. "Great. I think the Cannons have a good shot this year."

"Uh huh," Harry said unconvinced as he looked at Bill, who had the same doubtful look. "Is it still as fun to be the 'Voice of the Cannons' as when you first started?"

"Yeah, I still enjoy calling the games, Ron said, still with a big grin. "I had one of the managers at the main Wireless station come by and talk to me the other day about doing a sports spot on their news show. I think I'll do that to earn some extra money. It would be good to have our own little house, you know?"

Bill and Harry agreed just as Gabrielle walked over and put an icy bottle of Butterbeer in Harry's hand. "I thought you could use this." She turned and walked back towards the group of girls, except that she used what Harry thought of as her runway walk, putting hips into a motion that should be illegal. Just as she reached her destination, Gabrielle turned slightly to look over her shoulder and wink.

Bill laughed at him. "Harry, I don't know how you keep up with three of them. Gabrielle seems just as dangerous as Fleur and I can barely keep up with her."

"It is difficult at times, but it can also be very rewarding." Harry wiggled his eyebrows in a knowing way, causing Bill to laugh again.

"So, what's it like at home with a Veela?" Ron asked in a hushed voice, looking for secrets.

Knowing exactly what Ron was fishing for, Harry told him, "It's amazing, Ron." Seeing his friend lean forward a little for the juicy details, Harry went for the kill. "Let's start with Ginny. She likes these little skirts that are so short and worn so low they're more like a wide belt. The tops she likes to wear are so small, and without a bra, that they-"

"Stop!" Ron cried out as he clapped his hands over his ears. "I don't need to hear about my sister."

"Perhaps you should see to your fiancée then," Harry suggested with an easy grin after his joke. "She looks fairly angry at you."

Ron turned a little, trying to see out of the corner of his eye, and groaned. "What did I do now?"

"I'd guess it's the way you ogled Gabrielle, but that's just my opinion," Bill said lightly with a teasing look of his own.

"Definitely," Harry agreed.

"But did you see the way she walked?" Ron protested.

"Yes, I did and I also saw Lavender's reaction and I saw Ginny about bust a gut watching both of you," Harry pointed out, still having fun with his friend.

"What? No way. How?"

Harry laughed at him. "Ron, I have years, literally years of watching Gabrielle do things like that and learning to keep aware of my surroundings." To avoid being pranked by your sister, he thought but would not say. "So yes, I did notice all of that. I would suggest you go grovel a bit, promise a nice dinner too. You can also tell her that I'll answer her questions about why I have three wives later this evening. I'll offer that to help you out since you got caught in Gabrielle teasing

me."

"You'll tell her your secrets?"

"Yes. Now, hurry over. I don't think you want her to get any more upset." Harry watched Ron practically run to his fiancée after a hurried "thanks".

Bill chuckled at his younger brother. "He's as amusing as Fred and George in his own way. So, Harry, is three it for you or are more wives on the way?"

Harry knew Bill was teasing him, thankfully. "Three is definitely enough and the girls are determined to not allow any more. I'm happy as things are, although I'm sure children will add a new level of chaos."

Bill started laughing again, but Harry did not mind. He really was happy with live and his growing family.

(Beta's note: hey, XRaiderV1 here, would like to apologize for the epilogue taking so long, I got blitzed around Christmas, after a few weeks taken to get some time to get used to the new laptop, my apologies for this one being late.)

((A/N: Here we are at the end of my longest story yet (~415K words). I don't think I'll do one this long again, if I can help it. As mentioned before but as a reminder, this story was about relationships not about fighting Voldemort or Dumbledore. The conflict (with both of them) was merely the way to bring the four bond-mates together.

I want to thank Marshall (XRaiderV1) for sticking with me to the end as a beta. My other betas had real life smack them around and had to give up helping me while they dealt with family emergencies. I continue to hope everything works out well for them.

I also want to thank everyone who has read to the end, and even more thanks for those who reviewed. As I post the last chapter (Jan 2013), the stats for the first 32 chapters of this story are approximately 1.66M hits, 3200 reviews, 3500 favs, 330 C2s. It really blows me away as to how popular this story has been. I've enjoyed writing it and wished I could have had more time to write it faster. I can't believe it's taken me 3 years to complete this, but it feels good to do so.

Sorry, but you'll probably have to wait a few months before anything new pops out, unless it falls under "Odds & Ends". - Kevin))